

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Following Jesus...ESPECIALLY **when life gets tough!**

(Studies in the letter to the Hebrews)

The Epic Quest of a Life of Faith

(Hebrews 11:8-31)

Study #12

Introduction: Adventuring with Jesus...

When Jesus' first disciples first said, "Yes!" to His "Follow Me," I don't think they had a clue as to what they had gotten themselves into.

Of course they found Jesus to be compelling. He was a great Teacher, very loving - and a miracle worker. He was just the kind of rabbi any Jew would want to follow.

But as they took their initial steps with Him, they didn't know where this journey of following would take them.

They would not have expected that His teachings would alienate Him and them from respected Jewish leaders.

They believed that He was the Messiah, but they would not have expected that the thrones and dominion He promised them would be for the world to come, not for this one.

They wouldn't have expected that He would die by crucifixion, that He would then be raised from the dead, that they would receive the life-changing power of the Holy Spirit, or that He would appoint them to be His ambassadors to the world.

Following Jesus led them into a life far different, with more surprises, reversals, highs and lows than they expected. So it was for them. So it is for us.

Our first step of faith ushered us into a relationship with Him. We could do nothing to save ourselves, so we took Him at His Word, believed His promise, and accepted the gift of eternal life, based on His death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead.

This same Jesus now invites us into the adventure of a life of faith, following wherever He leads.

Walking by faith with Jesus is a walk into the unpredictable. It is a journey into the unknown. It is an epic quest where anything could happen. The life guided by faith in Jesus will often be filled with abundant spills and thrills - as we'll see in the stories before us today.

We began last Sunday, will continue today, and next week will again (thanks, Bill Otley!) enter into the stories of some men and women who walked by faith.

They did what God commanded, trusted Him to lead them, and never saw much farther than just around the next bend.

Their stories compel us to also live by faith. And today's "Story Time" brings us, first, into the story of the patriarch, Abraham.

Abraham and Sarah (11:8-13)

Leaving by Faith (v. 8)

[8] By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he left, not knowing where he was going.

By the time we enter Abraham's story (he was Abram at this time), his father, Terah, had already moved from Ur of the Chaldeans with his family (including Abraham and Sarah - Sarai at this time) to the land of Haran, which moved them a bit closer to the land of Canaan.

It was in the land of Haran that the LORD said to Abraham:

**[Genesis 12:1] “Go from your country
And from your relatives
And from your father’s house,
To the land which I will show you;
[2] And I will make you into a great nation,
And I will bless you,
And make your name great;
And you shall be a blessing;
[3] And I will bless those who bless you
And the one who curses you I will curse.
And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.”**

Prior to this call, as far as we know, Abraham did not know God.

In fact, Joshua tells us, **[Joshua 24:2] “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel says: ‘From ancient times your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates River, namely, Terah, the father of Abraham and the father of Nahor, and they served other gods.’”**

Abraham was seventy-five years old when he left Haran to enter Canaan. He knew about Canaan, but had, almost certainly, never been there. It was unexplored territory.

But God told him to go. So, sight unseen, with no idea as to what Canaan was like, he went. And he went fully understanding that he was going to inherit that land. One day, it would be his!

This is implied in the phrase **“I will make you into a great nation.”** If you’re going to be the starting point of a **“great nation,”** you need land.

We can only imagine what would have been involved in his leaving, what treasures he and Sarah left behind, the friendships and family they left behind, the memories they left behind.

Think of the last move you made - the excitement, the disruption, the loss, the change! What an adventure!

The author of Hebrews goes on to describe the life Abraham and Sarah lived in Canaan.

Living as a Stranger by Faith (vv. 9-10)

[9] By faith he lived as a stranger in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise...

Abraham went to Canaan trusting a promise from God. The whole time he was in Canaan, he lived there by faith in an inheritance that he never received.

He knew that backpacking through Canaan was not what God had in mind in the original call to go to Canaan. (Genesis 12) To be a **“great nation”** meant settling down. Permanent buildings.

But he and Sarah never had a stick-built home. They lived in tents and wandered from place to place. And Abraham learned that there is a difference between inhabiting and inheriting.

He lived his whole life **[10] looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”¹**

And Abraham never saw that city.

Becoming Parents by Faith (vv. 11-12)

[11] By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised. [12] Therefore even from one man, and one who was as good as dead at that, there were born descendants who were just as the stars of heaven in number, and as the innumerable grains of sand along the seashore.

Gerontology, 101

¹ The near fulfillment of that promise came in the days of King David, when he transformed Jerusalem into a royal city with beautiful structures. But Jerusalem was then destroyed. So, the ultimate fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham won’t be fulfilled until the New Jerusalem is in place. (See Revelation 21)

Just to get a level set, let's remind ourselves of Abraham's and Sarah's station in life when they became first-time parents.

When Isaac was born, Abraham was roughly one hundred years old, and Sarah was about ninety. And in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul mentions the role of Abraham's faith in Isaac's birth.

[Romans 4:19] Without becoming weak in faith, he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old., and the deadness of Sarah's womb.

The author of Hebrews highlights the role that Sarah's faith played in the conception of Isaac.

Sarah, woman of faith

When Sarah first heard the prophecy from an angel that she would bear a son to Abraham, she - again, at about age ninety - laughed, which was not her greatest faith moment.

As she laughed, she said to herself, ***[Genessis 18:12] "After I have become old, am I to have pleasure, my lord being old also?"***

That's Sarah doubting that she will ever again have the pleasure of intimacy with her husband (which she has known) AND that she will ever have the pleasure of bearing a child (which she has not known).

The angel who gave the prophecy to Abraham about the birth of Isaac, accused Sarah of laughing, which she denied. But she did, actually, faithlessly, laugh.

At some point after that laugh and the angel's rebuke, she came to believe that what had been promised would happen.

So, full-of-faith, she entered into marital relations with her century-old husband, believing that God could perform the physically impossible and use that union to produce the promised son.

And so it came to pass that Isaac (whose name means "laughter" in Hebrew, perhaps in honor of his mother?) was born "***at the appointed time as the LORD had promised.***" (Genesis 21:2)

After this meditation on the first family of faith, the author of Hebrews takes a minute to summarize the lives of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob.

In that paragraph, the author weaves together three threads.

Summary section (11:13-16)

They all died in faith, without seeing fulfillment of God's promises (v. 13)

[13] All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen and welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.

First, not one of these four people received a full fulfillment of the promises God made to them.

Remember. The promise was for full ownership and control of the land of Canaan, "***great nation***" status, innumerable descendants, and worldwide blessing.²

All of them saw some of this. None of them saw anywhere near all of it.

But they believed. They held on to God's promises throughout their long lives while not inheriting.

They saw those promises the way a hiker sees a mountain range in the distance. They knew that's where they were going, and they also knew that they weren't there yet.

Second, they all knew that even while living in Canaan, they were never, really, home.

They all rejected their former homes and lived as aliens (vv. 14-16a)

² Consider all the promises made to Abraham in Genesis 12, 15, 18, and 22.

[14] For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. [15] And indeed if they had been thinking of that country which they left, they would have had opportunity to return. [16a] But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.

There are terms from our own times that describe the lives the patriarchs lived: aliens, immigrants, exiles, refugees. That's how they saw themselves.

Abraham and Sarah had been born and raised in Babylon and had plenty of opportunities to move back there. They never did. They had lived in Haran before moving to Canaan. They never went back there, either.

But even when they were living in Canaan, their home, they knew that it wasn't really theirs. Again, they were inhabitants, not inheritors.

Same for Isaac, Abraham and Sarah's son. Same for Jacob, Isaac and Rebekah's son. They lived in Canaan for most of their lives. But it still wasn't theirs. They didn't own it.

They each knew, *"This isn't what God promised. One day it'll be ours, but not today. Today, I'll live as the alien I am, trusting that, sure as anything, that day is coming."*

Then, third, because they chose to live as aliens and refugees, they brought special pleasure and pride to the heart of God.

God is not ashamed to be called their God (v. 16b)

[16b]...Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them.

You and I are familiar with the concept of shame. It's not a good feeling to feel ashamed for what we've done. I understand shame.

I know that I'm forgiven for my sins, but I'm ashamed of the sinful things I've done. I know I'm not alone in this.

And I'm not alone in feeling both a sense of shame AND pride in America, in the state of Texas, in San Antonio, in our church.

Both shame and pride come with the territory of being people. Both are par for the course for every institution run by people.

But here we read of God not being *"ashamed."* of these people we've been thinking about. In fact, God loved to be referred to as ***"the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."***³

Not that they were, by any means, perfect. That's clear in Genesis and here in Hebrews. But God wasn't ashamed of them. He was proud of them.

If God was ***"not ashamed"*** of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, it begs the question, *"Might God be ashamed of them? Of any of His people?"*

Once, Jesus was speaking to some people who had believed and were following Him. He called them to the rigorous life of discipleship. After raising the bar of discipleship high, Jesus said this:

[Luke 9:26] For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when He comes in His glory and the glory of the Father and the holy angels."

It is possible to live in such a way that God is proud to be called our God. It is also possible to live in such a way that God is not.⁴

³ See Ex. 3:6, 15, 16, 4:5; Deuteronomy 9:5; 30:20; 1 Kings 18:36; ! Chronicles 29:18; 2 Chronicles 30:6; Matthew 22:32; Mark 12:26; Luke 13:28; 20:37; Acts 3:13; 7:32.

⁴ Moving to the human side, the Apostle John warns us that we might experience shame if we have not ***"abided"*** in Him / have not lead God-honoring lives. ***[1 John 2:28] Now, little children, remain (abide) in Him, so that when He appears we may have confidence and not draw back from Him in shame at His coming.***

Why did the author of Hebrews bring up the stories of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Jacob? He is inviting us to imitate their faith and to lead lives that cause God's heart to burst with pride at our faithfulness!

Learning from the patriarchs...

If you had been reading this as a first-century Christian who was facing persecution from your Jewish friends and family for following Jesus, you would have been deeply moved by these stories of your ancestors.

Two thousand years earlier, they lived as aliens and never felt like they were "home." They lived and died, waiting for the fulfillment of the promises God made to them.

And that's your lot, too.

You've already lost possessions and have been publicly ridiculed for your faith in Jesus. (Hebrews 10:32-34) You may yet lose more.

But you can live like your forefathers did, faithfully waiting for the promises' fulfillment, even if they are fulfilled on the other side.

You have a better and lasting possession to look forward to. Just like them, you are an alien and an exile and a refugee. Leading that kind of a life, God will not be ashamed to be called your God.

Jumping forward to 2024, we're also inspired by the examples of the Old Testament patriarchs.

And we're inspired by our brothers and sisters in Jesus who have embraced the truth that this world is not our home. They have proudly worn the "Christ-Following Exile" badge.

And if obeying Jesus means that our lives don't quite align with the values of our day, if faithfulness to Him means that we're out of step with our culture and even made fun of, if trusting Him means that our lives take a very different - and sometimes harder! - direction, we "**joyfully**" (Hebrews 10:34) accept that because, like them, we're looking for a better and a lasting possession.

Your life as a Jesus-following disciple is an epic quest, a faith adventure. Change and movement and disruption are all the order of the day. Your status is not quo.

There are sacrifices to make and obstacles to clear. The mission Jesus gives you is to lead a future-looking life now.

So, we'll keep on following Him, no matter what. We'll be His ambassadors here until we make it all the way home.

In what remains in our passage for today, we'll see more stories that point us toward the epic quest of faith.

First, back to Abraham.

Abraham and His Descendants (11:17-22)

By Faith, Abraham Passed His Greatest Test (vv. 17-19)

[17] By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and the one who had received the promises was offering up his only son; [18] it was he to whom it was said, "THROUGH ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS SHALL BE NAMED." [19] He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type.

We're not surprised that when highlighting the theme of faith, the author reminds us of this story. (There is an ancient Jewish tradition that marks the story of Isaac's sacrifice as the tenth and most difficult of all of Abraham's trials.)

Genesis 22 begins with a command from God to Abraham.

[Genesis 22:2] "Taken now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you."

In everything in this whole scene, God seems to contradict God.

He called for human sacrifice. He called for the sacrifice of the son for whom Abraham and Sarah had waited twenty-five years. He commanded Abraham to violate the deepest of human affections.

We know that ancient Canaanite and Babylonian religions practiced human sacrifice. Abraham had been thinking that Yahweh was different than other gods. Now, we wonder if he wonders...

But his quick and complete obedience to God is stunning.

He got up early the next morning, collected what he would need for the offering, and began the three day journey to Mount Moriah. The teenaged Isaac was with him.

Abraham was ready to go through with the sacrifice when God provided a ram caught in some nearby bushes. He sacrificed that ram instead of his son and the *“as good as dead”* son was restored to Abraham, the *“as good as dead”* father. (v. 12)

So, God proved Himself different and better (Hebrews 11:6) than Abraham had ever dreamed. He wasn't like the gods of Babylon and Canaan at all.

And Abraham proved himself more obedient and trusting of God than we would have ever thought possible.

The only way he was able to believe the promises about Isaac AND obey the command to sacrifice Isaac was to believe that God was capable of making a work-around like - raising the dead!

Talk about an epic adventure, a journey into the unknown, a life-changing episode that called for faith.

Abraham's victory was *“by faith.”* And the stories continue.

Abraham's Descendants (vv. 20-22)

Isaac (v. 20)

Hebrews 11 next shows us Isaac as an old man. Isaac saw *“by faith”* the good things God would do for his sons. He blessed Jacob and Esau.

That's not according to birth order as he began to understand the disruptive ways of God. (Genesis 27)

Jacob (v. 21)

Throughout his life, Jacob (Isaac's son) made a lot of missteps. He deceived lots of people and was, himself, deceived.

But at the end of his life, *“by faith,”* he blessed Joseph's two sons. Just like his father, Isaac, had done. The younger first, then the older. Jacob “got it.” (Genesis 47:31).

Joseph (v. 22)

Joseph (Jacob's son) lived in Egypt. Joseph was a very powerful man in that kingdom. But, because of the promises God made to his father and grandfather, Joseph knew that his people's future lay in Canaan, not Egypt.

So, *“by faith”* he told his family that when they left Egypt to return to Canaan, they were to take his bones back with them. (Genesis 50:22-26)⁵

And sure enough, four hundred years later, when Moses led the people out of Egypt, they took Joseph's bones with them.⁶

The author next focuses on Moses.

Moses (11:23-28)

⁵ Even in death, Joseph wanted to participate in the fulfillment of God's promises. He had firm hopes of resurrection in that land, which is why he gave the command.

⁶ [Exodus 13:19] *And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for he had made the sons of Israel solemnly swear, saying, “God will certainly take care of you, and you shall carry my bones from here with you.”*

By Faith, Moses' Parents Hid Their Son (v. 23)

[23] By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents, because they saw he was a beautiful child;⁷ and they were not afraid of the king's edict.

Moses is the subject of the sentence, but clearly, his parents were the ones who hid him. They rescued their son *"by faith."*⁸

And then Moses followed in his parents' faith footsteps. Here are some of the strongest words about faith we find in Hebrews 11.

By Faith, Moses Refused to be Called Son of Pharaoh (vv. 24-26)

[24] By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, [25] choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the temporary pleasures of sin, [26] considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward.

Notice that last line. The author tells us that Moses...
 ...spurned a privileged position (v. 24), and
 ...chose to suffer with God's people (v. 25), and
 ...preferred affliction to the temporary pleasures of sin... (v. 26)
 ...FOR ***"he was looking to the reward."***

The promise of God's sure to come reward was so clear and precious to Moses that it motivated him to sacrificial living.

This is a major theme of Hebrews - and, in fact, it is a major theme of Scripture! - so we don't want to miss it.

The promise of a coming reward (See Matthew 6) and a rich inheritance from God is a good, holy, righteous motivation to sacrifice anything and everything to faithfully follow Jesus now.

By Faith, Moses Left Egypt and Observed the Passover (vv. 27-28)

[27] By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king;⁹ for he persevered, as though seeing Him who is unseen. [28] By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of the blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch them.

Moses could see the visible king all right. There was nothing wrong with his eyesight. But through the eyes of faith, he could more importantly see the invisible KING. And that made all the difference.

The author next takes us to the shore of the Red Sea.

More Faith Heroes (11:29-31)

By Faith, the People Crossed through the Red Sea (v. 29)

The Egyptians with their chariots and weapons, who looked like the strong ones, were destroyed. The Israelites, looking weak and helpless, were delivered by God as they crossed over the dry seabed ***"by faith."***

By Faith, the People Brought Down the Walls of Jericho (v. 30)

And once Joshua led them into the Promised Land, they came to the city of Jericho. Jericho was protected by a wall. That wall was strong enough to withstand any attack by the Israelites.

⁷ F. F. Bruce believes that the faith of Amram and Jochebed implied that they had some sense of Moses' special destiny. Or...it could be that the beauty of their child (objectively or to them; See Acts 7:20) moved them to act in faith to preserve him.

⁸ Exodus 2:2 ascribes the faithful act to his mother. Surely, she acted in concert with her husband.

⁹ Like mother and father, like son, Moses did not fear the wrath of the king. Scholars disagree as to whether this verse describes Moses' flight to Midian (Exodus 2) or the departure from Egypt on the way to the Red Sea (Exodus 12-14). Mainly because of chronology, I see this as his flight to Midian.

God commanded that they march around the city for six days, silently. On the seventh day, they blew trumpets - and the wall came a'tumbin down. (Joshua 6)

This battle plan made no sense, but the Jews trusted God. The walls fell down *“by faith.”*

By Faith, Rahab Welcomed the Spies (v. 31)

[31] By faith the prostitute Rahab did not perish along with those who were disobedient, after she had welcomed the spies in peace.

Only one woman and her Jericho family were spared when the Israelites rushed over that broken-down wall in conquest.

Rahab, a Jericho prostitute, cast her lot with God's people.¹⁰ Prior to the destruction of the wall, she hid the Jewish spies and sent them on their way in peace.

Rahab did what she did *“by faith”* and was delivered and rewarded by God.

Conclusion:

Life with Jesus begins with a step of faith. We believe God's promise, accept His gift of eternal life, and become redeemed sons and daughters of God. It's all of grace.

Life with Jesus continues as we take trusting steps into the unpredictable adventure of following wherever He leads.

The trajectory of the life of each man and woman we have seen today was dramatically changed by their courageous decisions to faithfully walk with God in their day.

By following Jesus, we have grabbed a tiger by the tail.

God is. And He is better than we would have ever thought. And He's going to lead us into unknown territory, call us to a mission larger than our own lives, and invite us to “next step” level discipleship.

THAT is the epic quest of the life of faith. And that is the life we don't want to miss!

¹⁰ Rahab is the only Gentile in the list of Hebrews 11 AND she was a harlot AND she would become an ancestor of Jesus (Matthew 1:5).