

“By Faith We Understand.”

A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab

11th Sunday after Pentecost. Proper 14, Yr. C. August 8, 2010. (Text: Hebrews 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.

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.”*

In the part of the Letter to the Hebrews that we read today, it says *“By faith, Abraham obeyed. . . and he set out, not knowing where he was going.”* Notice this: *“by FAITH, Abraham obeyed.”* —Not by logic, ...not by social pressure, ...not by force, ...not by any other inducements, ...but by FAITH. By faith, Abraham the city boy became a tent-dwelling nomad for the rest of his life – entirely in response to the Voice of God – departing on a journey with no established destination.

Abraham just packed up and *left* town. I wonder what the neighbors said. What did they think when Abraham left his historic, family home and his established business, and took off? *And what do you suppose he said to them?* It’s not an everyday event for any of us to tell our friends, *“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. To a place he’s going to show me when I get there.”*

For those of you with a nice home here in Aspen or anyplace else, what would your friends think if you told them you were selling your house and buying a Winnebago so you could be free to go wherever God told you *whenever* God had a mind to tell you to move on? —Most people we know would be pretty skeptical if a practical, mentally stable neighbor not only said that he’d “heard God,” (which, by itself is *very* out of the ordinary), but that God told him to sell his house, close down his office, liquidate his assets, pack up his family, and travel to some destination to be named later.

The Bible says that by faith Abraham obeyed God. But it was a long time before he got to the place God had promised—a *really* long time. However, not only had God promised Abraham a land, he’d also promised him an heir, a son. He’d promised to make him “the father of a great nation.” Abraham and Sarah were childless, and by the time they got to the Promised Land, they were very old... far beyond

the normal age of becoming parents. But when Abraham was a hundred years old and Sarah was not much younger, the Child of the Promise arrived! —Living in faith includes *waiting* in faith. People of faith learn to be patient.

Abraham truly 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. *Faith and obedience*: those two go hand-in-hand.

I want to say this: There's a message for you and me in the story of Abraham. And the message is about the *life* journey you're on. You can go your own way, or you can go God's way. You can make your own plans, or you can follow God's plans. You can trust your own wisdom, or you can rely on the wisdom of God. 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 have to follow a dream?" —But Abraham *believed* what God said, and he acted. He believed God, and he obeyed God. He had *faith*. He was a city fellow, but when God said so he became a tent-dwelling nomad. You might say he sold his house on Red Mountain, bought a motor home, and hit the road — for the rest of his life. Now *that's* obedience.

Faith is a decision. It's a choice. I have said this before and you'll hear me say it again because it bears repeating: the opposite of faith isn't doubt; it's certainty. As the Bible tells us today, "*Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*" Abraham heard God calling him to set out on the road to an unknown destination. He had no GPS. He had 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 saying something 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 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. *That's* what God is calling our church 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... In practice, what do you think it means to follow Jesus? I don't think it's mainly about Sunday church attendance. That's very good, but it's not the main thing.

Following Jesus is not mainly about religious practices. Rather, it's about *believing* Jesus, *trusting* Jesus, *obeying* Jesus — pondering his words, patterning your life according to his example, yielding yourself to his Spirit, and expecting that *as you do this* —step by step, day-by-day— one day you'll wake up and realize that you've crossed the frontier and you're living in the Kingdom of God. —But you weren't aware of exactly when that cross-over from the kingdom of this world to the Kingdom of God happened!

This is a *process*. God is calling you to discover what the Kingdom of God is *AS you follow Jesus!* Do you 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. We don't know exactly when we're going to enter it. We just keep believing and keep moving on.

Here's the point of this sermon, and you've probably guessed it already. *It's in the journey itself that you find the destination.* It's in believing God, staying on the road with Jesus, moving on, moving on, that you discover, all of a sudden —even while you still feel like a homeless nomad— that you've crossed an invisible frontier and entered the Kingdom of God. You entered the inheritance God promised you long ago, and you didn't even know when it happened.

You're in the Promised Land — regardless of where you might be on a map of the world. But you can only *live* in the Kingdom of God if you keep moving on, trusting God to give you directions for the next day's journey.

Faith is the assurance of what we hope for, the conviction of what we can't yet see.