

VENTURING INTO THE UNKNOWN

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

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Christianity, Judaism and Islam are sometimes called the three Abrahamic religions - all of us see Abraham as a central figure in our faith stories. Abraham's name first appears in the Bible in a chapter from Genesis that probably few people read - it's a long list of names of people who descended from the family tree of Noah. There at the end of this chapter, is the name of Abraham's father, who had three sons. Abraham married Sarah and they lived in a place called Haran, which is now part of Turkey. That's the only introduction we're given. And then, in Genesis chapter 12, these words which seem to come out of nowhere...words which have influenced the course of human history, helping to establish three world religions...these words which affect geopolitics until this day...chapter 12 begins, "Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go.' 'Go from our country. Leave your people. I'll show you where to go. I'm going to make you the founder of a great nation; it will be a way for me to bless all of the families of the earth." This is the start of the understanding of Israel as a promised land, but what I want to call attention to today is the call and response between God and Abraham. If these words seem startling to us, as we read along in the book of Genesis, imagine how startling it would have been to Abraham to receive a message like this. "Go!", God says. Abraham doesn't hesitate, he doesn't ask any clarifying questions - "Which way are we going, God? Will we need warmer clothes? How long are we going to be gone?" No. God says, "Go." And

Abraham packs up all of his possessions and he and Sarah and their household follow. Not having any idea where they were going, or how long the journey would take, or if they would ever return home.

The writer of the book of Hebrews knows that the people in the early church are familiar with the story of Abraham and Sarah, so he uses it as a means of encouragement. These Christians were persecuted. Some had been put into prison, some had been victims of robbery; most had experienced hostility, ridicule and shame, simply because they followed Jesus. They refused to worship Caesar or the Roman Gods. Instead, they worshiped a crucified savior, someone who was executed as a traitor to the empire. They were a tiny minority in a hostile environment. So the writer of Hebrews wants to bolster their faith and he hopes that sharing the story of Abraham and Sarah will help, in two ways. First, he wants them to be reminded of Abraham's example of faithfulness - in difficult times, it helps us to have examples of people who have gone before us, courageous people who have lived their convictions despite what anyone else thought, people who were true to what they believed, people who lived out of their values no matter the cost. Second, the writer of Hebrews points to God. "And look at what God does. God remains faithful to Abraham and Sarah. God leads them to the promised land. God gives them a child in their old age, even though even they laugh out loud at the idea of it...God was with them every step of the way and God is with you as well."

The first Christians, in those first decades after Jesus, felt like strangers in a strange land. They were trying to live a countercultural way of life. The Roman army was suspicious of them because Jesus had stirred up so much trouble, so they were always living on edge. These new Christians were living in uncertain times.

And I empathize with them. We too are living in a world that seems strange and unfamiliar. And frequently frightening. We could spend the rest of the morning coming up with a list of disturbing situations, ways in which the world around is far different than the way we thought it would be when we were growing up, no matter when that was. But the question is, "How do we live in uncertain times? How do we maintain our faith, and even grow it, when the future seems so unknown?"

Last Sunday afternoon, about 60 of us from this congregation went to Vermilion to host a picnic for residents of the Road to Hope sober living facilities. It was a beautiful afternoon - we cooked out hot dogs and burgers, we served salads and baked beans and desserts, the children played, adults were sitting around talking. Towards the end of the picnic, Doug and I sat down at the end of a table across from a family that consisted of a 9-year-old boy, his mother, and his grandmother. They were super friendly, the mom was proud to tell us that she has been clean and sober for 14 months, we had a nice conversation. After a little while, the boy got up to play with some of the other children. And then the mom had to go get ready for work. But the grandmother stayed, and she told us more about her life. She's 60. In addition to the daughter, she has another child, a son who is career military. He lives out of state with his family and seems to be doing well. But she worries about her 39-year-old daughter who also has a 21-year-old son. I could tell she worries that her daughter might relapse, that the daughter isn't quite steady enough yet to properly care for her son. So the 9 year-old lives with the grandmother. I asked if the 9 year-old's father was in the picture. "Well, not really," she said. He's 60, and has eight other children. She talked about what it's like to try to convince her daughter that the 9 year-old is better off in the grandmother's care. She just wants to buy a few

more years, give him more stability. She talked, and we listened; it seemed to help her. And I was full of admiration for her patience, her courage, her faith. I thought about how addiction has forced so many grandparents into this situation, raising children at an age when they thought they'd be finished with child-rearing...and I thought about how different her life surely is from the way she'd imagined it would be.

She never would have chosen to have a daughter with addiction, but that's the world she's living in. Most of the time we don't choose our unknown territory. We don't choose to venture into the world called cancer, or the land called dementia. None of us wants to know what it's like to live with unemployment or other financial insecurity. How do we do it? How do we cope with the curveballs life throws our way, in our personal lives and in the wider world?

The book of Hebrews was written to encourage people who found themselves living in a world far different than the one they'd imagined. It's written for people who need to know what it means to live with faith in uncertain times. We live in uncertain times, too, and so we look to the pages of history and ask ourselves, "Who else has found a way to live with courage and hope in difficult circumstances?"

When we were in Israel this spring, we visited the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem. This time I was struck by the exhibits that featured the writings and the art that had been created during the persecution of the Jewish people in the 1930's. Some of this creativity emerged in the concentration camps; much of it was made in the ghettos of places like Warsaw. There were children who kept diaries as they watched their family members burn; painters who knew that they were living in extraordinary times and they wanted to chronicle their experiences for history and also as a way to keep their own souls alive.

There are rooms full of exhibits of sketches, scraps of journal entries and prayers, examples of worship services that were held in camps. It is a remarkable testament to the human spirit, that under the worst circumstances possible, there were thousands of men and women and children who did not give up. They snatched whatever bit of freedom they could, the freedom of their minds and imaginations, the freedom to have a conversation whenever possible...they recorded what was happening to them so that their stories would not be lost. It was a brave act of faithful resistance.

In 1940, the Nazis forced all of the Jewish residents of Warsaw into a 1.3 square mile ghetto. To put that into perspective, 400,000 Jews were kept in a space one-tenth the size of Avon Lake. In two years' time, 100,000 of them had died of disease and starvation.

And still, in those conditions, ghetto residents organized. They organized soup kitchens, schools, musical events, poetry readings, prayer services, political discussion and resistance efforts. One of the spiritual leaders in the ghetto was a man named Rabbi Kalman. He continually encouraged the people in the ghetto to maintain their imagination and their hope. Here's an excerpt from his last sermon. See if you hear a little bit of wry gallows humor as well as much wisdom as this rabbi who has seen the death of his loved ones and the very worst of human behavior writes this: "God, we believe you love us. As an ideal parent would. We don't know why you willed the world to be as it is. Maybe because you thought to share free will with us. You probably hoped it would work out better. So we pray for the ideal kingdom you imagined, when all creatures use free will for peace and justice. But in the meantime, help us eat and drink and love one another...Help us act. Give us insight into whatever blocks us from choosing community, family, and

mutual support. Gift us with your power of imagination. So that we can continue to hope in you and in each other. Amen.”

What we learn from these brave souls is that living by faith is a choice. Faith is choosing to trust, not that God will take away all that is evil and unfair, but that God will be with us through it all. Faith is like a muscle that we can make stronger through practice. The men and women who dared to light Sabbath candles and keep their worship practice alive even in the concentration camp didn't learn to pray when times were desperate. They knew prayers and psalms inside and out because they'd been immersed in worship and scripture every day of their lives. Their faith endured because it had become part of them; it had seeped into their memories.

The early Christians met in homes, behind closed doors, sharing communion meals, singing together, remembering the stories of Jesus and keeping them alive before they had any written gospels. This practice strengthened them for facing a world that was hostile to their values and commitments.

I know that the problems facing our world today seem daunting and our future seems uncertain. But we aren't the first to live in difficult times. We can learn from those who have gone before us that relying on the resources of our faith gives us the courage and strength we need. Complaining about the way things are, blaming others for the way things are — these are not options for us. God says to us, as God said to Abraham, “Go. Get out there in the world, venture into the unknown and I'll show you where to go and what to do.”

Let us pray. God of Abraham and Sarah, give us the courage to follow where you lead us. Help us to live in trust and in hope. Amen.