

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 14—Year C

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20

Psalms 50:1-8, 23-24

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Luke 12:32-40

How's your **faith** these days? How's your faith in institutions? How's your faith in people's capacity to do the right thing? How's your faith in your fellow human beings? How's your faith in God? Have in events in the world, or in your life, shaken your faith? Does it feel strong and secure or a little shaky on any given day?

The **Letter to the Hebrews** today plunges us into an exploration of faith, and let's start by acknowledging that faith is such a loaded word. The word can feel heavy and leave us with an either/or option—you either have faith or you don't. And if bad things are happening, well, you must not have had enough faith. In this sense, faith becomes something we barter with—if we have enough, God blesses us; if we don't have enough, we're in for trouble. Faith can feel more like belief and feel like a series of doctrines to which we must ascribe, very much a matter of intellectual assent.

But faith is so much more than all of this. I love that the word in Greek is πίστις, and comes from a root that means “to trust.” To have faith is to trust, and to trust is a matter of our hearts, more than it is a matter of our heads.

So, what does this trust look like in the flesh, on the ground? First of all, its foundation is grounded in hope, and it holds fast to things not seen. And **Hebrews** pulls us up to the 20,000-foot level to remind us that creation itself, everything we see, God made from things that are not visible. So much more is always going on than what can see and touch and taste and smell and hear and understand. So, hope and holding fast to that which is beyond what we can currently see or even conceive of—yep, this is going to ask for a lot of trusting.

But **Hebrews** moves next to remind us of the experience of our ancestors in the faith, reminds us of our collective story and experience as the people of God.

Take **Abraham**, in trust, he **listened 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.** The path wasn't clear to him at all. He **stayed for a time in the land he'd been promised, and it was a foreign land,** and he lived as a nomad, in tents—**so did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of this same promise.** He looked forward to a less nomadic life; he **looked forward to a city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. Abraham never got city life, nor did Isaac, nor did Jacob;** they never got to experience being that settled, but they came to trust that God moved with them and dwelled richly with them in the tents. Cities are great, temples are great, but **John 1:14 reminds us the Word, the Word who was in the beginning, the Word who was with God, the Word who WAS God, that Word literally pitched its tent in our flesh and lived among us. *That's who Jesus is—a tent dweller in our flesh.***

Sometimes, God calls to us, as individuals and as a whole people, to set out for a place that isn't clear, that feels foreign, that is full of uncertainty. And while we might long for the certainty of a well-defined, well-structured city, Abraham and Isaac and Jacob remind us that we can trust God to be with us in our tents as we journey into the unknown before us.

The world we live in right now feels a lot like a foreign land, and so much of the last few years has called

us out of all that has felt familiar and forward into a land where it's hard to know which way is up some days. A God who is pleased to dwell with us on this nomadic journey we're on—that is immensely comforting. We can trust in God's abiding, tent-dwelling presence.

And **Hebrews** reminds us that **Abraham and Sarah both trusted in and received the power of procreation, even though he was way too old and she was barren.** Abraham trusted in God's promise that **life could be born from**, as the text says, **“one who was as good a dead.”** Wow. Ever have days where you feel as good as dead, where you feel too old, where you feel pretty barren, where you wonder if there is life in you at all? To think that none of these feelings, potent though they may be, are determinative of our capacity to create and birth life-giving things into this world—again, this is grounds for the best kind of hope. God is always working life in us, even when we feel good as dead. And it wasn't just one **descendant** that came forth, but **“as many as the stars of heaven and the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.”** We never know where the seeds we sow, the things we create, the life we birth will go; we never know how wide the ripples will spread and who they will touch along the way, but we can trust it will reach so much farther than we can possibly imagine.

The next piece is a little harder because it lays before us a deep truth. **Hebrews** tells us that these **ancestors in the faith, they died without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is a heavenly one...**

Sometimes, we hear the promise; we catch the vision; like Moses, we can see that promised land in the distance; we can even greet it, but we may not be able to take up residence there. We feel the strangeness of this world, the foreignness of it, because our hearts are always seeking home. As people of faith, we straddle two worlds always—the world as it is here with all this maddening flux and tension and conflict *and* the kingdom of God where the fullness of love reigns. Our hearts long for that homeland where love reigns supreme; we desire that better country.

When we're on this path, straining forward, as Paul would say, for what lies ahead, it's so hard not to think of the land we've left behind. It's tempting to keep all those doors open; our society loves nothing more than keeping all our options close at hand and having escape plans at the ready. But if we keep looking back to what we've left behind, we'll miss experiencing God where God longs to meet us now. In resurrection life, Jesus tells his disciples to go on to Galilee and there he will meet them.

What is the land that God has called you to leave behind? Do you catch yourself thinking of that land, yearning for it even? What is the homeland you are seeking? How do you handle the tension of straddling these two realms? Where do you find yourself leaning? If your faith is shaky in the future, what would it look like to let your heart trust instead? What subtle shift might happen in your spirit if you trusted in hope, trusted in that which you cannot yet see, instead of giving in to despair or cynicism or hardness of heart because what we see is such a mess?

Yes, we live in a strange and foreign land these days; yes, there are lots of unknowns and loads of uncertainty. Yes, some days, we feel too old, or too barren, or as good as dead. And yes, God has never been afraid of the wilderness, and often finds it easiest to meet us there because it is in the wilderness that our hearts are the least defended and most open. We may be nomads in this world; we may be pitching tents and taking them down over and over as we move forward from here, but God is right there with us; Jesus is right there with us—in the flesh; in our flesh—we are not alone, ever.

We have every reason to hope. We may be seeking a homeland, a place of refuge and rest, but our hearts already know the truth, God has already set up home in us; God is already at home with us, and God goes with us wherever we go. Our heart knows instinctively, intuitively how to trust this love that will not let us go.

So, on the days when your faith is shaky, don't beat yourself up; we all have days where what we see makes it hard to hope. On those days, give trusting a try. Trust that God is, at heart, a tent-dweller and likes nothing better than being our traveling companion as we make our way in this strange and foreign land. Amen.

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