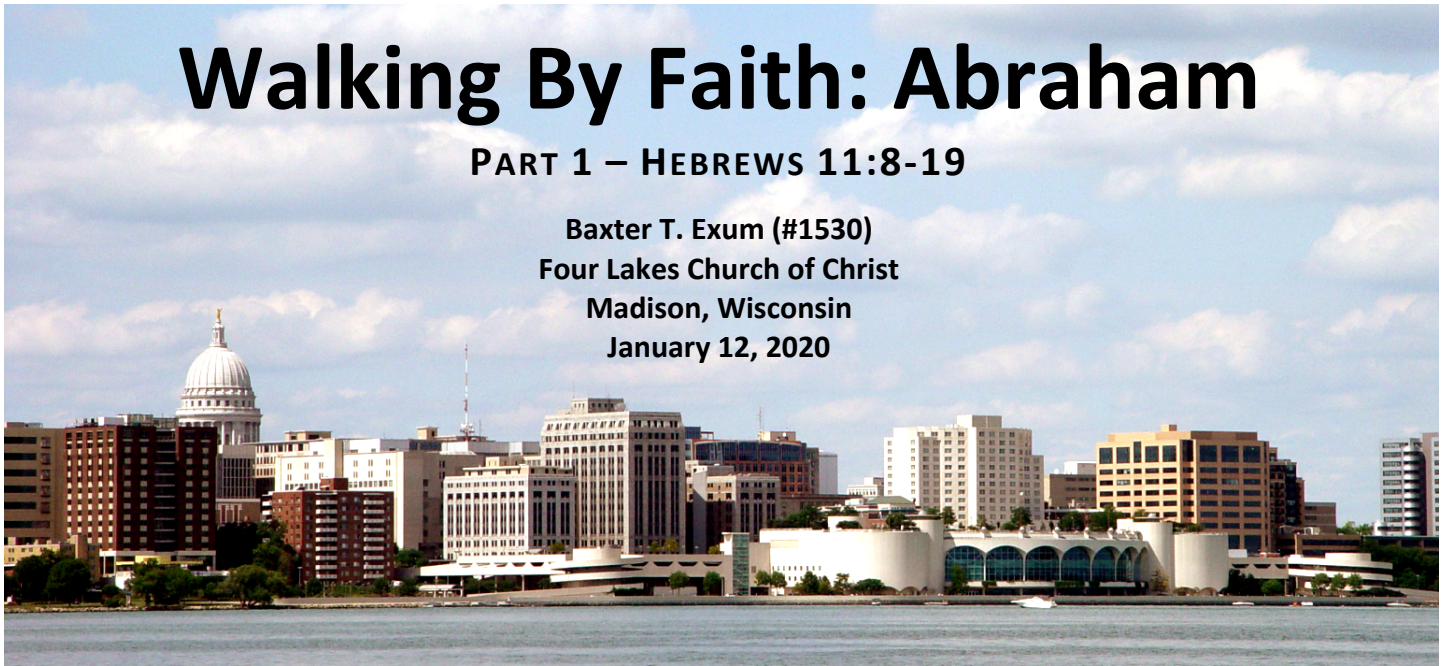


Walking By Faith: Abraham

PART 1 – HEBREWS 11:8-19

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Just a few moments ago, John read a passage from 2 Corinthians 5, where the apostle Paul says that we have courage, because we as God's people ***"walk by faith, not by sight."*** As we begin this new year, I want us to take a few moments to look at what it means to ***"walk by faith, and not by sight."*** And it's important, because so many might be at least a bit confused as to what faith actually is. Perhaps some hear the word ***"faith,"*** and they think of faith being the irrational acceptance of a thought in spite of evidence to the contrary. Perhaps we know of others who might think of faith in terms of hoping to do what is truly impossible. The sign in somebody's office said, "We the unwilling, led by the unqualified, have been doing the unbelievable for so long with so little, that we now attempt the impossible with nothing." For some people, that is faith. Or maybe we've heard people describe faith as being a blind leap into the dark. Of course, most of us know that faith is actually a leap from the darkness into the light. But we do know that faith is important.

As we look to the Word to define what faith is and what it means for each of us, I would invite you to turn with me this morning to Hebrews 11 (p. 1882). By the way, the image on the wall up here is not really tied to the lesson! This was taken at Gibraltar Rock this past Tuesday morning. Some of you might have seen this (and the others) on Facebook this week, and I'm just using this as a background. Nevertheless, Hebrews 11 is often described as the "Hall of Fame of God's Faithful." And at the beginning of the chapter, the author explains that, ***"...faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."*** He then explains the importance of faith to God in verse 6 as he says that, ***"...without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him."*** So, we have a very rough explanation of what faith is, and we know that faith is necessary to please God, but now we need to know more. What does this mean for us? What does faith actually look like? And that's why we have Hebrews 11, because in Hebrews 11 we have a long list of great men and women who are considered faithful in the eyes of God. We have some examples. We have some role models. You might have noticed a story in the news this week, reporting that a large percentage of people are completely incapable of completing any kind of home repair project without first consulting YouTube. But we know why! It helps to watch somebody else do it, whether we are changing the belt in the dryer, replacing the transmission in the washing machine, or doing some kind of car repair. Whenever we learn a new skill, it helps to watch somebody else do it. We need a demonstration. And that's what we have here in Hebrews 11. We have an entire chapter dedicated to the heroes of faith – men and women who risked everything, taking that leap from darkness into the light; men and women who did whatever they had to do to be pleasing to God.

We could easily spend the rest of this year going through these one by one, but I want to focus in on one man. His wife is mentioned here as well, and that's awesome, because what they did was absolutely a team effort. They were faithful together. I am referring to Abraham, sometimes known as the "Father of the Faithful," along with his wife Sarah. We know from Romans 4:11 that Abraham is identified as **"the father of all who believe."** In Galatians 3:29 we are told that those of us who **"belong to Christ...are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise."** Abraham is our spiritual ancestor, in a sense. And in Hebrews 11, more verses are dedicated to Abraham and Sarah than to any other characters in this chapter. And I think we'll see why in just a moment. But, let's start by looking at Abraham – not the chapters in Genesis, but the paragraph here in Hebrews 11, the passage highlighting Abraham's faith, the passage that summarizes Abraham's entire life in just a few verses. And as we read, I want us to notice how faith caused Abraham to act. And this is true all through this chapter. By faith, people did things.

Let's look together at Hebrews 11:8-19,

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 went out, not knowing where he was going.

⁹ By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; ¹⁰ for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

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 there was born even of one man, and him as good as dead at that, as many descendants as the stars of heaven in number, and innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore.

¹³ All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. 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 from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them.

¹⁷ By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; ¹⁸ it was he to whom it was said, "In Isaac your descendants shall be called." ¹⁹ He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type.

Again, as we look back at this passage, I want us to focus in on FAITH and what Abraham's faith actually motivated him to DO. We'll look at three of these today, and we'll save two for next Sunday.

I. **But we start this morning in verse 8 as we find that “by faith” Abraham OBEYED GOD BY LEAVING HOME.**

The first time we see Abraham in Scripture comes in Genesis 11. His name at that time was Abram, and he was living in Ur of the Chaldeans, which is located along the Euphrates River, roughly 200 miles southeast of Baghdad, near the modern city of Nasiriya. Nasiriya is the fourth-largest city in Iraq. During the invasion of Iraq back in 2003, some of you might remember the capture of Private Jessica Lynch, when her supply convoy took a wrong turn in Nasiriya. She was rescued several weeks later in a raid on the hospital. If you haven’t kept up with her lately, it sounds like she went to college after the war and now serves as a 5th-grade teacher in West Virginia. But that all happened basically in Ur of the Chaldeans.

Archaeologists have done extensive work in ancient Ur, and they have found the remains of a thriving city. They’ve found brick homes, and temples, and libraries. They’ve found the remnants of art and literature. Ur was the primary city for the worship of the Sumerian moon god, and to this day, the ziggurat in honor of this god is the best preserved and one of the most famous historical monuments in the world. You may also remember from the first Gulf War, how archeologists were extremely upset that Saddam Hussein was parking his few fighter jets right in front of that ancient ziggurat (basically a stepped pyramid). He figured that coalition forces probably wouldn’t attack such an important archaeological site. That was Ur.

But we find, though, that God called Abram to leave this advanced civilization, and Hebrews 11:8 tells us that, **“...he went out, not knowing where he was going.”** God called, and Abraham packed up and left, without knowing any details. And when we look back at the account in Genesis, we find that God told Abraham to leave and to go, **“...to the land which I will show you.”** There were no plans, but Abraham was to get up and start moving, and God would tell him when he got there.

Most of us don’t travel like that! When we leave home, most of us have some idea where we are going! We think it’s bad when the kids keep asking if we’re there yet. But imagine our kids asking us, “Where are we going?” And imagine not having an answer! That would be a trip I would rather not experience. But this wasn’t just a trip; it was a move. Most of us, when we move from one place to another, we know at least something about the place we are going. We research schools, and crime, and health care, and housing. But Abraham has no idea where he is going. And I would emphasize: Back in Genesis, the Bible tells us that Abraham is 75 years old at this point! He’s already had a long life, he’s established in Ur, but God tells him to get up and go, and in faith, Abraham obeys. He leaves behind his land, his home, his friends, his old way of life, perhaps his extended family, everything he’s ever known, and he moves. In faith, Abraham obeys God’s command. By faith, Abraham does what God is telling him to do.

Now, as we apply this to our situation today, I hope it’s obvious that our faith and trust in God also motivates us to obey God’s commands. And God telling Abraham to go, even without knowing all of the details, seems very much parallel to the call of Jesus. Over and over again in the gospel accounts, Jesus met people and would say, **“Come, follow me!”** And, **“If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.”** We might not understand all of the details, we might not truly understand the cost involved, but Jesus calls us to leave the life we’re familiar with, to give up the old ways, and to follow him. In a sense, the Christian life is a journey, a move from one place to another.

There were some, like the Rich Young Ruler, who heard the call and did the math, and decided that following Jesus would be too expensive. But there were others, like the apostles, who heard the call and dropped their

fishing nets and even left their families to follow Jesus. Like Abraham, they **“by faith”** obeyed. At the age of 75, Abraham moved more than a thousand miles. He obeyed God and made a completely fresh start. So, as we start looking at Abraham, I’m hoping we can be encouraged by his example. He did something very difficult, but he trusted God. By faith, Abraham obeyed.

II. And that leads us to the next few verses as we find that once he arrives in the Promised Land, Abraham LIVES AS A STRANGER, HE LIVES AS AN ALIEN (as the NASB puts it in verses 9-10).

And so, not only did he move and leave everything behind at the age of 75, but we also find that once he gets to where he is going, he continually lives as if he did not belong there. Today, we might say that he never unpacked his bags. But instead, Abraham pretty much lived out of a suitcase for the rest of his life. He never put down roots. For some people, one of the scariest verses in the entire Bible is Hebrews 11:9, because it refers to Abraham **“dwelling in tents.”** Can we imagine spending the rest of our life in a tent? Not too long ago, we talked about this earthly body being described as a tent (in 2 Corinthians 5). You might remember: We had a tent up here. We talked about how tents have improved tremendously over the past 20 years or so. There are some benefits to living in a tent, but we also discussed some of the disadvantages – I don’t think they’ve developed a bear-proof tent quite yet, getting dressed lying down can be a challenge, wind can be a problem; then, on top of that, you are basically sleeping on the ground. Some of you here today might be able to get down and sleep in a tent, but you might never be able to get back up again. Getting in a tent might be a one-way trip for some people!

So, let’s go back and think about Abraham and Sarah for a bit. Abraham is 75 years old. Sarah is 65. They leave home for a life of never being settled again. They leave their comfortable home in Ur for a life of living in tents – waking up to see your breath because it’s so cold, waking up to shake the frost off your towel before heading out to get a shower, waking up to discover that your shampoo is frozen solid, waking up to scrape the ice off of your cell phone so you can see what time it is, waking up at midnight to the sound of raccoons scratching at the tent, waking up to the sound of heavy breathing out there somewhere (something that sounded like a bear). These are some things I’ve experienced living in a tent from time to time. But for Abraham and Sarah, this was from here on out. This was permanent. What would you miss if you had to move into a tent for the rest of your life? I would miss warm, running water. We don’t usually appreciate warm water until we need to haul it ourselves and heat it over a fire.

Did they miss having windows and a front porch? Did they miss having a garden? Did they miss having floors? Maybe so. But they understood that they were living as strangers in a foreign land. They understood that they were just passing through. The only land they ever owned was a small cave they used for burials. That was it. And yes, it would have been hard. We think about traveling in foreign countries today. Often, we don’t know the language, and things that would be so easy back home are suddenly very difficult. I think of traveling to Montreal to help the church there. I don’t know French. And I remember how hard it was to take the bus. I remember walking around and being thankful that I wasn’t driving. I remember seeing a sign with a picture of a tow truck on it and then a whole bunch of fine print. And I have no idea what it said! Some of those signs are difficult in English. Life is hard here sometimes, but so much more so in a foreign land where we don’t understand the language, where we stand out from the crowd, where we always look different. It’s hard being different sometimes.

And what is true for us must have also been true for Abraham and Sarah. Not only did they move, but they never settled down. They lived permanently, for the rest of their lives, as strangers and aliens. They were always weird

– from a different culture, worshiping a different God, living by a different standard, speaking a different language, wearing different clothing, eating different food, and on and on. And it must have been so hard. And yet, what was true for Abraham and Sarah is also true of us today. As Peter says in 1 Peter 2, we are ***“A chosen race, A royal priesthood, A holy nation, A people for God’s own possession.”*** We are also strangers, living in a strange land. And as Peter goes on to explain, ***“Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul.”*** He urges us to, ***“Keep [y]our behavior excellent among the Gentiles.”*** We are different. But that is our mission. Like Abraham, we are just passing through. As Paul explains in Philippians 3:20, our citizenship is in heaven. Like Abraham, we don’t really belong here. This world is not our home. We are just passing through. It’s easy to forget this. We tend to settle down here. And yet sometimes we need the reminder that no amount of redecorating, or landscaping, or pruning, or building will change the fact that we are strangers here. By faith, Abraham lived as a stranger in a foreign land. And we follow his example when we live in the same way. Let’s remember that being different from this world is good.

III. As we come to the end of the first three examples, let’s notice in verses 11-12 that the author of Hebrews specifically brings Sarah in here with the reminder that by faith Abraham and Sarah HAD CHILDREN.

And I don’t know whether this is the best way to summarize this, but Sarah and Abraham had children when it was impossible to have children. Of course, there’s quite the background to this back in Genesis. God calls Abraham out of Ur at the age of 75 and promises to make him a great nation, but as time goes on, they seem to doubt the promise, and they take matters into their own hands, as Abraham has a son (by the name of Ishmael) with Sarah’s servant Hagar. This is at some point in Abraham’s mid-80’s. Thirteen years later, when Abraham is 99 years old, God appears to him again and repeats the promise. I’m totally paraphrasing here, but in that discussion, Abraham responds to God and basically says, “Yes, God, I know you promised this before; see, here’s Ishmael, my son.” And God says, ***“No, but Sarah your wife will bear you a son.”*** We then have the three strangers in Genesis 18 who come in for a meal and ask for Sarah. Out of the blue, as they wait for Sarah to come in, they basically say to Abraham, “We’re coming back in a year, and when we do, Sarah will have a son.” Sarah overhears this and laughs to herself. At this point, one of the strangers (now identified as ***“LORD”*** in the text), says to Abraham, ***“Why did Sarah laugh?”*** Sarah denies laughing, and the Lord says, ***“No, but you did laugh.”*** It’s a strange passage. Sodom and Gomorrah are destroyed in there, but a year later, Sarah indeed bears a son, and they name him Isaac, just as God had instructed. At the time, Abraham is 100 years old, and Sarah is 91. Now, back here in Hebrews 11, I find it interesting how the author refers to Abraham as being ***“as good as dead.”*** He describes Sarah as, ***“beyond the proper time of life,”*** but you know what happened? These seniors got busy and had a kid! God had made a promise, they stumbled here and there, but ultimately they believed God’s promise, and then they acted on their faith.

The point here is: Even when God’s promise seems humanly impossible, God still keeps his word. The birth of Isaac was completely out of the normal order of things, but God does still need Abraham and Sarah’s cooperation here. They believe, they act in faith, and God takes care of the rest. And this is the reminder for us: God keeps his word. Our role is to believe it and act on it. When he promises forgiveness if we will only allow ourselves to be immersed in water, as strange as that might sound, our role is to obey.

Conclusion:

We hope to look at the next two examples next Sunday, if the Lord wills. But for now, we've learned something about faith.

- By faith, Abraham obeyed. God told him to pack up and leave everything behind at the age of 75. He might not have understood everything perfectly, he certainly didn't have a map, but Abraham obeyed.
- By faith, once he arrived in the Promised Land, Abraham lived as a stranger. He didn't belong. He was different. He lived in tents for the rest of his life. He was just passing through. In the same way, we also live by faith as strangers in this world. We don't belong here. We, also, are just passing through.
- And finally (for today) by faith, Abraham and Sarah were able to conceive a son, just as God had promised. The promise seemed impossible, but Abraham and Sarah ultimately believed it, and did their part. So also, we obey God today, even if we don't completely understand how God will get it done. We trust and obey.

If you're interested in learning more about God and his plan for our lives, we invite you to get in touch. We respond to the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus in faith, and upon our repentance and baptism our sins are forgiven and we are added to his church. If you are ready to take that step, let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com