

Faith, Fear, and Financing Foundations

Genesis 15:1-6

Psalm 33:12-22

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Luke 12:32-40

Have any of you ever been rappelling? Are you familiar with the idea? It's a method of lowering oneself down from a height, typically used by climbers after ascending a rock wall. The idea is that a rope is attached to a harness around your waist. The rope is secured at the top, winds through a belay device that keeps the rope from slipping through, and you hold the rope's length determining the speed at which you descend. You lean back and walk down the wall, letting rope out as you go until your feet reach the ground below. The key to success is leaning far enough back that your feet remain between you and the wall, but it's scary to trust that harness enough to lean back over a cliff's edge. I used to teach rappelling to kids, and I cannot tell you how often they would end up scraping their noses against the wall, or falling sideways, because they couldn't bring themselves to sit down in the harness and lean back. Rappelling is one of those activities that requires an act of faith to be successful. It's counter intuitive to lean back over a cliff's edge. And no matter how much a person can explain how rappelling works, knowing how it works is not enough. Rappelling requires the faith to put one's weight down against the harness, lean back, and start taking steps.

Christians use the word faith a lot! But I think we tend to use it to mean the things we believe rather than what we trust. The word faith means confidence, assurance, it's something beyond question. Faith is something that begs action, it requires a response. It is the difference between understanding the mechanics of rappelling and actually leaning back against a harness over a cliff's edge. Faith can be hard. It is uncomfortable because it's risky.

Today's readings spotlight Abraham because he was lauded for his faith. When God, who Abram had never previously known, told him to leave his homeland and head out into the unknown, Abram left. When God told him he would have a child, even though his wife had never delivered a child and was far past childbearing age, he trusted. He waited 30 years for that promise to be fulfilled. When God told him and his household to be circumcised, he did it. When God asked for his only son as a sacrifice, Abraham laid Isaac on the altar and pulled out a knife. Abraham believed God and then lived his whole life as an oddity in a strange land, a foreigner. Genesis says, "he believed God". That word believed means to prove firm and reliable. Abraham leaned back, over a cliff's edge, and settled all his weight on the firm promises of God.

One of the most interesting things about Abraham is that he never saw the promises fulfilled. He saw his son born and he lived to see his grandchildren. But that is a far cry from seeing his descendants grow to be as vast as the stars in the sky. Nevertheless, his faith was the first link in the chain. If he hadn't trusted God and allowed his life to be moved by God's direction, we would not be in this room today. Which is the thing about faith that is so profound. We never see or know just how many people are impacted by the choices we make to act in faith.

After citing Abraham, the author of Hebrews goes on to laud all the faithful who have died without personally receiving the promises. He says they did not receive them, but they saw and welcomed them from afar. It was their eyes of faith that made our life of faith possible. And we too live with that same awareness. We do not live merely for ourselves, but we join hands with those who have gone before us and with those who are coming after us, forming a chain of unbreakable faith that continues in every generation to prove God faithful, even though we ourselves only experience a portion of the promises.

The thing that marks all the people of faith throughout all generations, according to Hebrews, is this confession that we are strangers and foreigners on the earth. We are all

seeking a homeland and this is not it. Regardless of if we're been-here's or if we're come-here's, none of us are ultimately stay-here's. If we are spiritual offspring of our father Abraham, we are seeking a better country, a different homeland altogether. One our eyes cannot see; one we experience through faith.

At a moment when the topic of immigration in America is to so incendiary, it is perhaps noteworthy to consider what our foreign-born friends have to teach us about living apart from the security of a comfortable homeland. All those who have traveled here have done so because they believe life on this soil is preferable to their own. Some have lived with privation, some existential threat, but most all currently live without the security of longevity in this country. Is that how we feel? As American Christians, our physical homeland is not in immediate jeopardy. If we claim a spiritual country, an eternal kingdom, we must work to uproot our security from this land. And, as the author of Hebrews says, stop putting our hope on earth and instead, "desire a better country". That word "desire" means to stretch out towards. Imagine opening our hands to release the possessions, the wealth, and trappings of this world, and stretching our hands instead towards the promises of God; like Abraham looking away from his own body, as good as dead, and gazing instead at the stars in the sky. Faith is a choice. We must decide where we will place our hope, we must choose to let go of the temporary security of earthly things.

But how do we do that? It isn't always straightforward. To help us understand how this looks, Jesus offers us a story. In the ancient world, there was no electricity. If anyone needed to move about after dark, he needed lamplight. Oil lamps in first-century Israel did not get lit and left. They burned through their wicks and their oil quickly and required regular tending. A slave responsible for providing light for an indefinite amount of time, while the master enjoyed a lengthy wedding banquet, had to remain vigilant in tending the light. Jesus indicates that the person who remains attentive to his task to serve his master

would then find that he was not merely provided for but then served a meal by the master himself. In a world where social status was practically unbreakable, the image of a master serving his own slaves was almost unthinkable. And yet, just as the Father desires to give us the kingdom, Jesus desires to serve us. We are God's offspring; God's purpose is to make us co-heirs with Christ, living in expectation of an otherworldly inheritance. Giving up our security in this life may feel threatening to us, but our inheritance and our security does not exist in the world that can be seen and measured with human measurements.

If we desire, like Abraham, a different kingdom, we will access it by faith. According to Jesus, faith is not just passive belief, but active and vigilant attention. We will find it by looking for it, by waiting and tending our lights through the darkness of night. The Psalmist says, "our souls wait for the Lord" because God "is our help". And just as we keep alert, watching for God, the Psalmist also reminds us that "the eye of the Lord is upon those who fear him". When we sacrifice our security to follow God, it is the Lord's love that guides, sustains, and supports us, just like the rappeler's harness.

We may be Americans. If we are, we ought to be grateful. But our nation is the wealthiest in the world. And as great as that is for our comfort, it's equally threatening to God's purposes for us in Christ. The Psalmist says, "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord". As Christians, our national identity is allegiance to God's kingdom which exists beyond earthly boundary lines, politics, and possessions. And regardless of our physical homeland, we confess that we are strangers and foreigners on this earth.

So, if we truly are migrants on this earth, merely passing through, we have some big questions to ask ourselves. As spiritual children of Abraham, are we living lives marked by faith? What are we holding onto that is holding us back? What cliff are we standing next to, when Jesus is inviting us to trust him, to lean back and allow him to keep us from falling?

May we be a people whose faith empowers us to confidently walk forward towards the city
God had prepared for us.