

Scripture**Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-16****(NRSVUE)**

11 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. **2** Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. **3** By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

8 By faith Abraham obeyed 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. **9** By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. **10** For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. **11** By faith, with Sarah's involvement, he received power of procreation, even though he was too old, because he considered him faithful who had promised. **12** Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, "as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore."

13 All of these died in faith 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, **14** for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. **15** If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. **16** But as it is, they desire a better homeland, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

In this letter, Paul reminds the audience that Abraham and Sarah were called upon to do some pretty wild things in the name of faith. While Abraham, Sarah, and their entourage were called to leave their homeland and, by faith, move to a new land, we are also called to move into areas where we may not have yet ventured. Maybe our faith calls us into relationships with our neighbors to assist them in ways that we have yet to experience. For example, instead of simply collecting food or clothing and donating it to an agency, we could assemble a team of volunteers from our church and actively provide food for the hungry, clothing for the needy, and basic medical supplies that people may need.

Given the circumstances, such as time, place, and age, Sarah and Abraham could have said to God, “Just leave us alone, please. We’re much too old for this.” What a great reminder that, regardless of our circumstances, we are able to put our faith into some sort of action. Everyone can do something, even if we are aging, not feeling well, or working hard just to make ends meet. No one is asking us to leave our homeland, have children in our advanced years (though many grandparents are raising their grandchildren), or take on every issue on its own.

Today’s text makes clear that for those in the genealogy of faith, such status does not count when we are called.

After recalling, in brief, the faithfulness of a long line of Jewish forebears recorded both in the Old Testament and, in the verses we skipped by in the lectionary text, the intertestamental texts, the author of Hebrews concludes by describing all of these faithful people as having “confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth” (Hebrews 11:13).

The first word translated “strangers,” is the Greek word from which we derive the term *xenophobia*. It describes people who are understood in some way to be completely “different” from the majority group. The second term, translated “foreigners,” describes not just any kind of foreigners, but those who have taken up residence in another land—in the words of contemporary political speech refugees or aliens.

In other words, all these faithful people here-described lived and understood themselves to be on the margins—perhaps even beyond the margins—of their earthly homes. Their security was virtually nonexistent. Abraham had to negotiate with the Sons of Heth to even have a burial place for Sarah (Genesis 23:3-9). While he may have done well for himself in the new land in which he lived, his strangeness—his otherness—was never forgotten.

While early followers of Jesus largely remained a poor and marginalized group, as their movement grew, Luke tells us about several key people of faith who *did* own their own houses, including such well known disciples as Simon Peter and Martha. In fact, it was in these homes and those of many others that the first Christians gathered to share their weekly meal (Acts 2:46-47).

The lesson that I hear in today's text is one of perspective. All of the faithful "considered" themselves to be strangers and foreigners. Perhaps not everyone in the genealogy of faith was, like Abraham, so literally set apart. But they, like the faithful who came after them, opening up their homes and holding all things in common, understood that possession is not the end or the sum of one's existence.

For this reason, Abraham not only lived as an alien in his new land, but also chose not to return to his old land. Because both homes—both physical spaces of existence—paled in comparison to the hope that he had beyond *both* lands. Our text describes all of these faithful as not returning to their homeland because "they desire a better one".

This homeland, this promised place towards which the faithful look in Hebrews, is the same expectant moment of the coming of Christ. It is the advent of God into our world—into our very homes and personal lives—in such a way that transforms the very nature of what it means to use such words. It is the experience of *parousia*—God's dwelling and God's Kingdom on earth.

How is it achieved? In God's time and through God's power, of course, but Scripture suggests that our answer should not end there. How does a homeowner make ready to avoid being burglarized? How did Abraham secure a place for Sarah's burial in a foreign land? Not by sitting idle.

The hope for a homeland, the promise of a time and place when all people can rest with true safety and security in the world God has given, does not come by building bigger walls or buying bigger guns. Scripture tells us, rather, that it comes by acting *in faith*.

The author of Hebrews calls us to follow in the footsteps of those who have gone before us, trusting the faithfulness of God, envisioning the promise of God's different and more complete security. This faith and hope enable us to live in whatever momentary insecurity or discomfort may be required to pursue God's purpose for God's world and God's people.

Our faith has moved us to do this; we are called to do so much more. In our passage from Hebrews, we are called to bring this "heavenly home" into reality, right here in our very own very own community. May our faith resemble that of Abraham and Sarah as we follow the Gospel message that shows us how we can truly move mountains in time of need as we envision our heavenly homeland together. May it be so. Amen!