



Saint John United Methodist Church  
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Message for April 30, 2023  
"By Faith: Abraham"  
Speaker: Pastor Tom Grieb  
Scripture: Hebrews 11:8-10, 17-19

## A Highlight Reel of the Faithful

The NBA playoffs are in full swing. We've had some pretty interesting developments already. The Knicks beat the Cavaliers, the Heat beat the Bucks, and the Lakers prevailed over the Grizzlies.

I haven't watched an entire NBA game in almost never. I will occasionally watch a portion of a game, but that's about it. During the playoffs though I have been watching the highlight reels to get a sense of the game. It takes between 3-5 minutes.

In Hebrews 11 we have a highlight reel, of sorts, of some of the great stories of the faith found in the Old Testament. The writer of Hebrews gives us just enough to let us know what happened. We are drawn to the Old Testament to learn more.

We are studying this great chapter over the next few weeks and the stories of faith chronicled there. We find there some real heroes of the faith. Those heroes put their faith into action. Those heroes put their lives on the line for God. They were people of deep conviction. They were wholly given over to the Lord of their lives.

The book of Hebrews was written to those who were wearied by persecution. By the turn of the first century the Christian church was under siege. For many, their faith in Christ cost them their lives. For others, that persecution cost them their faith.

The writer of Hebrews wrote to encourage those who were a part of the church to hold fast. The stories listed in Hebrews 11 were highlighted to encourage the believers to stay true to their faith, just as those of old did.

Those early Christians were encouraged to *"run with perseverance the race set before them."* I know from running the Derby Mini Marathon yesterday that running sometimes demands perseverance more than anything else.

The heroes of faith listed in Hebrews 11 encourage us as well. They cause us to consider our own faith and how it informs our lives amid the stuff we face.

Today we consider Abraham, the Father of Faith.

Relatively speaking, Hebrews has quite a bit to say about Abraham and his wife Sarah. We will talk about Sarah on Mother's Day, so stay tuned.

Today, we consider Abraham's faith, particularly the faith needed to strike out from a place of comfort into the unknown. We'll also consider what it means to trust God absolutely. All of this is in keeping with that great definition of faith we find in Hebrews 11:1 where it says, "*Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.*"

Let's hear then about Father Abraham. Today we read Hebrews 11:8-10, 17-19. Let's hear this from God's word.

### **Hebrews 11:8-10**

*By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.*

### **Hebrews 11:17-19**

*By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death.*

### **Moving**

Cheryl and I have moved a number of times down through the years. Elders in the United Methodist Church are essentially itinerant preachers. Cheryl has moved a lot more than I have given the fact that her dad was a United Methodist pastor as well.

I have often said that "*moving even in the best of circumstances is tough.*" Those of you who have moved know that to be true. Moving is particularly tough when kids are involved.

The toughest time for our family was when we moved from Owensboro to Louisville. The boys were of the age where it was particularly tough for them to leave what they had grown accustomed to. Tearing away from friends is never easy, particularly when you're an adolescent.

I will never forget sitting on a park bench with John and him screaming, "*Why do we have to move?*" When I talked with him about the bishop sending us to a new church, he screamed even louder, "*Tell him to send somebody else.*"

It was not to be.

Moving involves a lot of uncertainties, a lot of unknowns. It is physically, emotionally, and spiritually draining. Again, *“moving, even in the best of circumstances, is tough.”*

Abraham and Sarah moved around as well. Abraham’s first move was at the behest of his father, Terah. They loaded up the entire family and made their way from Ur of the Chaldeans to Haran in Canaan. That’s mentioned briefly in Genesis 11:31.

A second move from Haran to Shechem is mentioned in Genesis 12:1-6. Abraham and his family had it made in Haran. They were more than comfortable. Everyone was settled in, which made the prospect of moving that much tougher. They were now called to leave all that behind for what, on face value, seemed like an uncertain future.

The writer of Hebrews puts it that Abraham obeyed, *“even though he did not know where he was going.”* I have said it often, *“We may not always know what’s around the corner, even so, we can be well-assured that God will be there.”* That was certainly the case for Abraham.

Living by faith has us striking out into the unknown more than we’d like. In striking out though we have the grand opportunity of letting God stretch us. Abraham moved from a place of comfort to being like *“a stranger in a foreign land.”* Ultimately, Abraham was blessed in that.

So, the question comes, particularly to those who are comfortable, *“Can faith actually grow if a person is too comfortable?”* God has a way of *“afflicting the comfortable and, of course, comforting the afflicted.”* He will not let us be *“at ease in Zion,”* as Amos 6:1 puts it.

If you are being stretched right now, ask yourself how God is involved in that. Ask yourself what God may be up to. Recognizing that God is at work and taking the faithful step of joining him in that will move you from where you are to where you need to be.

Faith had everything to do with Abraham moving from Haran. Abraham was willing to lay everything on the line for the sake of his relationship with God. As we mentioned last week, there is a big difference between simply believing in God and, actually, committing ourselves to him. True faith is more than just intellectual assent. James 2:19 states that *“even the demons believe—and shudder.”*

A life of faith is a matter of choice:

- To trust God above all.
- To live life as God wants us to live.
- And to do as God wants us to do.

By such faith we:

- Become open to God’s love.
- Place ourselves in his care.
- And seek to live following his leadership.

That's the way it was for Abraham, I pray that it is for us.

## Trusting

Henri Nouwen tells the story of a family of trapeze artists he knew called the Flying Rodleighs. They became close friends and even let him practice with them on the trapeze. One day Nouwen asked the head of the family what it was like to fly through the air.

*"As a flyer, he said, "I must have complete trust in my catcher. The public might think I am a great star, but the real star is my catcher. He has to be there for me with split-second precision and grab me out of the air.*

*I simply have to stretch my arms out and wait for him to catch me. The worst thing a flyer can do is try and catch the catcher.*

*A flyer must fly, and a catcher must catch. A flyer must trust with outstretched arms that his catcher will be there for him."*

Abraham knew who his catcher was. Do you?

With that in mind, let's shift to an even more challenging part of Abraham's life. We consider, just as the writer of Hebrews did, the testing of Abraham.

You know the story. Isaac, the one upon the whole promise of God rested, was to be sacrificed. The story is one of the most dramatic in all of scripture. Abraham even goes so far as to raise a knife over his son. We can't even begin to comprehend that. In that instant, God calls a halt to things and offers a lamb for the slaughter. God provided in a powerful way.

This was not a matter of intellectual assent. This was certainly not a case of wavering faith. This was pure, unadulterated trust. Abraham would trust God to no end. Abraham was tested in that and came through with flying colors. God came through as well. He caught Abraham at just the right time.

Henry Blackaby in talking about trying to follow the will of God talks about what he calls "*a crisis of belief*." It comes to us all. We essentially ask ourselves, "*Am I really going to do that?*" I have likened "*a crisis of belief*" to jumping off a high dive for the very first time.

John and Brian were lifeguards at Lakeside. Each of them took their turn guarding the dive pool, and they watched one kid after another take their first jump. Those kids would climb the ladder ever so slowly, walk out to the edge of the board cautiously, look down with trepidation, and then pause. It was in the pause that I am sure they asked themselves, "*Am I really going to do this?*"

Some would even get so weak-kneed they would try and walk back. As we all know that's a no-no when it comes to a high dive. So, eventually they would trust the lifeguard to save them, if needed, the water to receive them, and off they'd jump.

There's nothing like the sweet release of trusting that everything is going to be okay.

I figure that's where Abraham was when all was said and done. He trusted God and God proved himself true.

What was it that Abraham said to his son, Isaac? "*God will provide.*" That's the stance of those who trust in God.

### **That Great Cloud of Witnesses**

We can't help but be inspired by the great cloud of witnesses listed in Hebrews 11. Abraham was among them.

By faith,

- They persevered in this life.
- They met every challenge.
- They gave themselves to God.
- And sought to glorify God.

That's just what people of faith do.

Think about it, those same people are cheering us on as we too seek to "*run with perseverance the race set before us.*"

So, let's throw off all that hinders us and run like the wind.