

Genesis 15: 1-6

After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, ‘Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.’ But Abram said, ‘O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?’ And Abram said, ‘You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.’ But the word of the Lord came to him, ‘This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.’ He brought him outside and said, ‘Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be.’ And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Hebrews 11: 1-3

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. 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.

Hebrews 11: 8-16

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. 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. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. By faith Sarah herself, though barren, received power to conceive, even when she was too old, because she considered him faithful who had promised. 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.’

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, 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 had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

MapQuesting Our Faith?

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I said at the last service, faith is knowing that whatever’s on that screen back there is okay, because I can’t see it. And now I have on this sort of Hollywood mic, so faith is

trusting them to know when it should not be on. That's faith. I'm a visual learner. That's why I'm glad Gretchen played today, because there's nothing more visual than a harp. It's beautiful, I love it, and I have to watch her play it instead of just kind of closing my eyes, because I like to see it. I can't learn if I don't see, and so I need to see things to understand. That's why I'm grateful Gretchen played today, I love to hear the harp and I love to see it as well.

So, since I'm a visual learner, and some of you will relate to this, I'm sure, if someone gives me directions over the phone, I'm pretty much paralyzed by it. I don't know, what does that mean, turn left, turn west and east. If I have a map in front of me, it might work out a little better. I can turn it and see what they're telling me on the phone. Are there any people out there that are like me, you turn the map when you make the turn, do you know what I'm talking about? Turn left, the maps turns left with you. Turn right, the map turns right. Sometimes the map ends up upside down. I'm not sure whether that's south or what that means, but I turn maps when I use them. So the visual learner in me just loves MapQuest. MapQuest is that invention on the Internet that allows you to type in directions. You type in Point A and Point B and it gives you directions. It tells you how to get there, step by step, and not only does it tell you, it gives you a map with a highlighted journey. So MapQuest is really special for people that are visual learners. But, like everything in computer-land, it has its limitations. Sometimes it maps out a route that I don't really like, because I sort of know where I want to go and I don't like the route it chooses for me. So I try to manipulate the data, try to get it to work out a different way, and it can be done, but it takes a little bit of thought.

In today's text, we have Abraham and Sarah displaying for us faith – faith that will take them on a journey of unexpected proportions. Abraham set out on a journey to an unknown land, an unknown future, and not as a young man, but as a man who, my text reads, is more advanced in years. So you can determine what “more advanced in years” might mean for you. The scripture tells us that Abraham set out not knowing where he was going. He had nothing to go on but faith, just faith. Faith that God would give him what had been promised. Abraham and Sarah, his wife, were childless. And yet, God told Abraham that his descendents would be more numerous than the sands on the shore. Abraham surely had a hard time believing this one. He had nothing to go on but faith, just faith, faith that God would give him what has been promised.

Now, I like to think that in those days it was easier to have faith than it is today. Today we have GPS systems and MapQuest to tell us where to go. My husband called someone the other night to arrange carpooling. I could tell he was talking to the dad instead of the mom because they talked about GPS systems throughout the conversation. I don't think any carpool arrangements ever got made, but now we know which GPS system to get for our car. So GPS systems can be good things. And I think that if God told me to set out on a journey, I might say, “Give me the address, God, so I can type it into MapQuest, then I'll know where I'm going.” Would any of us, in today's world of instant directions, dare head out on just God's word alone?

And maybe in that time it was easier to have faith in regard to childbearing for people more advanced in age. Today we have fertility drugs and medical procedures and *in vitro* fertilization, all kinds of ways to stretch the boundaries of childbearing for advanced-age people. If God called today and told someone here in this congregation right now that they were to conceive and bear a child, we would probably only believe it if we knew those folks had some sort of fertility expert on speed-dial. But miraculous things can and do happen sometimes, when we take matters into our own hands. But here, here in the world of Abraham and Sarah, we read that faith is all that they have to go on. Hebrews tells us that faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Abraham and Sarah had hoped for a child, and they hoped for a home, peaceful home, when they got to wherever God had called them to on their mission. But they couldn't make that happen without God, and they knew that. They had to trust and believe and be convicted that there are things out there in the unknown world. The promises of God are in those unknown tomorrows, and they can actually come true if we have faith and courage.

One might take this to mean, as has often been the case with these texts, that we must not worry about proving everything, that some things we just go on, some things we believe just because we have faith, that faith alone is enough, that faith is the answer to our questions. But I don't think that's what faith is at all. Faith is much more complicated than answers to a question. Faith is deeper than that. Faith is what implores us to ask the questions, to probe, to dig, to seek to be closer to God and the fullness of life with God. I believe faith always seeks and always questions.

Now I like to change MapQuest, as I said earlier, I want it to change, I don't like the route it's giving me. Maybe there's something to that. Maybe we shouldn't just blindly take the first route that pops out of the printer. Maybe we should ask questions, like, "What can I do to make this journey better?" That's what faith asks. "Yes, God, I will follow you, but first I have a few questions that might make choosing my direction a little easier." Consider, after all, where we would be as a society, if we hadn't questioned the Biblical texts, questioned the faith of our fathers, so to speak. We would have no equal rights and no civil rights for women and others, for one thing.

Sarah and Angelina Grimke were sisters who spent their summers on a slave-owning plantation in the South, and they questioned the journey they were on. They condemned slavery, and they led the way for women to speak publicly in church, at least about this issue. Sojourner Truth in the famous "Ain't I a woman?" drew attention to the plight, in particular, of female slaves, at great risk to her. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and a host of other women championed legal and economic equality for women, and worked hard to get the Nineteenth Amendment passed, which gave women the right to vote. There's a line of women, I can't even count how far behind me, and some men, through the years, who championed full clergy rights for women, which was not granted in the Methodist Church until 1956. All of these people I mentioned, all of them had to have great faith and courage that God would provide. They had to know that if they just trusted their questions, the tables would turn in their favor. They didn't have blind faith, a faith that just accepts things as they are, but they had a questioning faith. A

questioning faith that would give them the power, the earth-shattering, boundary-breaking power, to see a right way, and not just the way it had always been. That questioning was dangerous for many of them, but it led them on breathtaking journeys of faith. It gave them a legacy of descendants, us today included, that are more numerous than the stars in the sky. These women, and others with them, displayed the faith of Abraham and Sarah, they did. They were headed to a destination that was as yet unseen, but they knew that being unseeing is different than being blind to what's out there, or being mute to the questions that need to be asked.

I saw *Hairspray* the other day. Have any of you seen that movie? It's mostly a fun-loving musical. It's not a movie everybody wants to see, but it fits my family pretty well. It has a lot of upbeat songs, but there's an underlying theme in this film of racial discrimination, back in the early Sixties, when segregation was the rule of the day. In one part of the film, you have the peppy lead character, Tracy, she's a young white girl, and she's portrayed marching in a picket line alongside her new black friends while they're trying to integrate themselves into a local TV dance show for teenagers. Tracy, in *Hairspray*, questions the system. She questions the way things had always been, because she knew that questioning was the right thing to do, and this is a line that's repeated in the film.

When I saw this movie, it reminded me of some real young women who stood in the line of fire during the Southern freedom movement. During my days at Iliff I was privileged to take a class called "Women in American Religious History," and one of our texts had nine women's stories in it, nine white women who fought in the Southern freedom movement. A couple of those women wandered through Iliff's doors during my three years there, and I got the privilege of meeting them. One of these ladies, Joan Browning, was a young white woman who found herself, quite by accident, in the middle of the civil rights movement. Much like the character Tracy I mentioned from *Hairspray*, she didn't plan to be there. Her words are that she just sort of stumbled into it. You see, she became friends with a black Methodist pastor whose church was just across the way from the university she attended, and suddenly, because of this friendship, her whole life turned upside down. He invited her to church, and she went, and because she went to her friend's church, she was expelled from the university she attended. This, this one event, set her out on an unknown path, with lots of questions, in particular, about her safety – but more questions about just why society was so set on being segregated. And she couldn't, and she didn't, leave those questions alone. She risked everything in her life because of faith. She was a lifelong Methodist and she knew that that faith she had from her childhood told her that the freedom movement was a journey she should go on. But it was a journey with no return. In spite of the risks, and without looking back, she headed forward.

These are Joan Browning's words: "I was genuinely surprised that crossing the color line was a one-way trip, a lesson that had to be repeated many times before I understood it. For me, fighting for an end to segregation was not something confined to picket lines or direct-action demonstrations, but a way of life. Being part of the freedom movement was a life-changing experience. In participating, I lost my only real opportunity for higher education, and I was alienated from my church. I experienced a lifelong separation from

my family and was set apart from the world in ways that affected all my relationships and all my employment options. For me, and for many other women like me, participation made us outcasts, women without a home.”

Abraham and Sarah find themselves without a home in this text, but they know God is with them. They don't, at least I don't believe, they don't have a map in front of them. But I'm sure, I'm sure they asked a lot of questions, and I'm sure they challenged God when things didn't seem fair. And sometimes, we do have it in the text, sometimes they took matters into their own hands. Remember Abraham's relationship with Hagar? That's taking matters into your own hands. I really have to think that if Abraham had had MapQuest, he might have tried to type out a journey. I think Abraham would have asked for directions to the Promised Land too.

But sometimes the journey just seems wrong, as it did for Joan Browning. Sometimes we do want to move the line on MapQuest, and that's why Google Maps lets you do that. I discovered that quite by accident. Google Maps is MapQuest's competition, and they have a feature I noticed when I was there the other day that says, “Drag to change route.” So, when I was trying to get my family from Longmont to the Lincoln Center, I knew I wanted to come up 287, but MapQuest insists on I25. Google Maps did too, but it let me move my highlighted arrow from I25 to 287. I think Google Maps is onto something. “Drag to change route.” When do we need to do that? We need to do that because sometimes the path we're given is not the path we should take. Sometimes we have reason to believe the path needs moving. If we have experience that tells us it needs moving, then we should move it, and I think God is with us in that. We should not stick to I25 simply because we have faith in the route that's been marked out for us. We should rely on reason and experience to guide our faith. You see, faith is more than just a map on a page, a highlighted journey that you have to take one way. Faith is more than just putting one foot in front of the other. Faith is knowing that, yes, there are unknown paths ahead of us. Unforeseen challenges lie ahead, but God has given us the minds, the hearts, and the courage to question the journey and to follow the path of questions - even if it leads to places that we never wanted to go, even if it means we are sometimes outcasts, even if it means that the map set before us is, in the end, tossed out completely. Faith means God is with us, in the questions, and in the journey. Thanks be to God. Amen