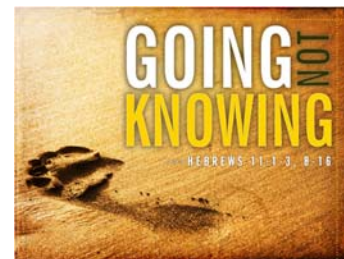


## Hebrews 11:1-16

August 7, 2016

Do you at least once in a while, get the urge to move farther away from civilization? Disgruntled Americans want to move to Canada before that great and terrible day in November. Fearful Canadians who see them coming want to move north. In either case, they may not be sure of where they are going but they are certain that they don't want to stay where they are.



Genesis 11 sets up the account of Abram and Sarai in a place called Ur in the land of the Chaldeans, but they didn't want to stay there. They were going to go to Canaan, but their journey got interrupted and they settled in a place called Haran. What was Chaldea like? Ur of the Chaldeans was the centre of a cultured civilization. It was the big city ... the moon-god was worshipped here. It was the place to be ... Vegas, Hollywood, the Big Apple. For Abram and Sarai, maybe it had lost its shimmer and shine. They packed up and moved to a place called Haran. It was not quite the big time, but still the moon-god's realm. Haran was on the Fertile Crescent and the trade routes that joined east and west made this the crossroads of the world. It wasn't quite like getting away from it all here either. It was ruled by the Amorites. That might not mean anything to you, but if this were a movie, the background music would be Darth Vader's Theme "The Imperial March". Haran was probably not the neighbourhood you want to settle in. As Genesis 12 unfolds, we are reminded that already back in Ur of the Chaldeans, God had talked to Abram about leaving that place for the sake of his spiritual life. So Abram said to his wife Sarai, "We gotta get outta this place ... if it's the last thing we ever do ... girl, there's a better life for me and you." Believing God's word and trusting in God's promise, they gathered up their possessions and set out for the land of Canaan.

Our text today from Hebrews 11 gives us an insight into what this all means for us. It helps us understand what faith is and it helps us grow in faith by putting it into practice. God's Word defines faith as being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. Luther defined faith as daring to trust the promises of God. Faith is believing that God will do what he has promised me in the Scriptures, even though my circumstances and experience don't always make it look that way. You and I are called to believe that God holds our todays and our tomorrows in His tender and gracious hands, not only when things are going well, but even, and especially when things don't appear to be going so well. Faith is not the inner strength of my will which tenaciously holds on to God in good and bad times. Rather, it is the strength of God in our hearts that allows and enables us to hold on when our own inner strength is exhausted.

Faith is believing that God plans good for me, even when I can't see the light at the end of the tunnel. So today God's Word gives us examples of His people of faith, because we can learn from them. What do we learn about Noah? He believed that God would protect and keep him safe even in the midst of the biggest storm that the world has ever seen. He believed that he was under the umbrella of God's grace and forgiveness, even though the whole world was about to feel the wrath of God's just judgement. He knew that he wasn't saved because he was so good and everyone else was so bad. He trusted God's grace, and he believed God's promise.

David trusted the promise of God that God would give him the throne of Saul and make him king. There was a time in David's life when God had promised David that he would one day be king in place of King Saul. Saul knew that day would come too, so Saul wanted to kill David. Saul sent his armies after David and David had to hide out in the mountains and caves of Judea. One day, David and his men had opportunity to sneak up on Saul's camp during the night. David was able to sneak into Saul's tent and could have taken Saul's life in a palace coup and declared himself king. But he didn't do that. David knew he didn't have to get the throne that way. God had promised that he would give the throne to David, so David was content to wait for that day, rather than take matters into his own hands. David knew that he didn't need to take the throne by force of arms. He waited for God to give it to him, as He had promised He would. But how did he know? How did he know he could trust God's promise? Faith is not an inner strength of will but an inner God-given strength to hold fast to the promise when there was no personal strength left.

Perhaps David remembered the story of the faith of his ancestor, Abraham. Imagine Abraham coming home to his wife Sarah one day while they still lived in Haran. Sarah, dear, the Lord talked to me today. Oh really? What did He say? He wants us to pack up and move. Oh, that's nice. Where to? He didn't say. Then I'm not going.

In Romans 4, St. Paul talked about the faith of Abraham and said that Abraham's faith didn't weaken. God had promised him a son through Sarah - many descendants - fame and wealth - the promised land for his descendants - the Saviour from his line. And Abraham waited for many years for that son, and he worried about it. He tried to help the promise along, and he grew impatient. So how can Romans 4 say that his faith didn't weaken? Abraham's waiting and worrying and his attempts to take matters into his own hands were indeed sins. But the good news is that his sins didn't cancel his faith. God remained faithful, and held Abraham in faith all those years, in spite of his sins. That's truly comforting to know. When the strength of your fears and your worries are trying to draw your eyes away from Jesus, God is still holding on to you, even as He held onto Abraham.

Do you realize that when Abraham died, the only part of the Promised Land he owned was his cemetery plot? But God had kept His promise and given him a son. And God held him in faith unto eternal life. Our text says, "All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance." They could have given up and gone back to Haran, the land they had left but they didn't. They trusted God to do for them what He had promised.

How do these examples help us in our faith? How do they help us live a life of faith? All these people were still living by faith when they died. And what does it mean to live by faith in the promises of God? It means that what God says and what He has promised will guide and rule my life. Not what the world promises. Not what the devil promises but what God says. 'Cause you can't trust the devil, and you can't trust the world. The Old Testament is not a book of fairy tales. The stories don't read like fairy tales where everyone lives happily ever after. They are not fables concocted out of someone's imagination to simply prove a point. They are real stories about real people facing real tests of their faith. Real stories about real people struggling against their doubts and their fears. Real stories about real people who dared to trust the promises of God and who lived by faith. And in the midst of the ordinary difficulties of life where temptation is always there enticing us to follow the ways and the thinking of the world, and to give up on the promise of God, and to doubt the faithfulness of God and the power of God, we are reminded that these examples are not given so that we can see how great these people were, but for us to see how great their God is.

If we start to think, "I have that kind of faith," we become self-righteous and if we start to think, "I could never be like that" we are led to despair. If we only read them to see how great they were, we would be led to a terrible conclusion. On one hand we would be led to pride in our great our faith. If you think Abraham had faith or David had faith, just check out my faith!! Do you remember the day Jesus said to His disciples that the time would come when they would all forsake Him and run away? And Peter said, "Not me! I will never fall." And before the night was over, he had denied Jesus three times. Don't ever take pride in how great your faith is. Let the one who boasts, boast of the Lord and how great Jesus is.

The other danger is that we come to despair at how weak and forlorn our faith is. We read about Enoch who walked with God every day. We read about Noah and Abraham and David and see their great faith. Then we look at our own faith and shake our heads. Their faith was so big and mine is so anaemic. You're forgetting how Abraham struggled to trust God while he waited decades for the promise of a son to be fulfilled. You're forgetting how Moses first wanted to save God's people on his own terms and then how he didn't want the job at all. You're forgetting how David fell into great sin. Don't focus on the greatness of their faith. You need to see the greatness of their God.

So tell me again ... what is faith? What does faith do? What does faith cost? What does faith gain? Faith understands that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible. When you consider the debate over creation and evolution, one of the things you have to understand is that the debate is not science versus faith. It is faith versus faith. Creation believes that God is eternal and the universe was formed at God's command and according to His design. Evolution believes that the dust of the universe is eternal and everything that exists, came into being by random chance. Creationist and evolutionists study the world around and look for evidence to support their theory, but in the end both are theories. Both are belief systems, based on mutually exclusive presuppositions. There is the eternity of matter and dust and the mindless evolution of living things from non-living matter or there is the eternity of the prime mover, the first cause, God, and the special creation of all that we see, feel, hear and smell. Which one will you start with? Which one will you believe in? Which one will you live by? Which one you believe will affect how you live and how you see the world, and how you see yourself.

What does faith do? It points us to God as the author of creation. But faith does much, much more than that. Faith makes us righteous in the sight of God. Abraham believed the Lord and he credited it to him as righteousness. What does that mean? Do you believe that on judgment day you can stand before God with a big smile on your face because you've been such a nice person? Or do you believe that on judgement day you can stand before God because Jesus suffered and died on the cross for all your sins, and that for Jesus' sake you are forgiven? Trying to earn heaven is a dead end. If salvation could be gained through the law, then Christ died for nothing. Salvation is by grace. It is through faith in the promises of God that faith gives us an inheritance, that faith gives life to the dead.

Do you realize that faith also comes at a cost? It cost Noah his family fortune. It cost Abraham his roots and his family of birth. It made him a stranger and an alien in a foreign country. It cost Moses the life of a prince and the treasures of Egypt. But then, none of them really gave up anything that they wouldn't have had to give up sooner or later anyway. They only gave up what they couldn't keep, and in exchange they received a gift they could never earn.

What does faith gain? Abel was a righteous man. Enoch did not experience death. Noah inherited righteousness. Abraham looked forward to a city with foundations whose architect and builder is God. Faith gains rescue from the wrath of God. Noah was saved from the flood. Moses and Israel were saved from the angel of death by the blood of the Passover Lamb. They were all saved by the grace of God. Faith removes fear. The Old Testament and Gospel readings for today echo a similar message. "Do not fear."

This is not built on wishful thinking. It is not built on fatalistic resignation. The Scriptures always add a reason to the words, "do not fear". It's never just "suck it up" or "shake it off". To Abraham God said "you don't have to be afraid, because I am your shield, I am your very great reward." To Isaiah he said, "you don't have to be afraid and here is why: I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are mine."

So what fears do you face? Non-acceptance by friends and peers? No job? Poverty in retirement? Do you fear for the future of the world in the midst of these perilous times? Are things going to get so out of hand that not even the power of God can do anything to help? Go back with me to Egypt at the time of Moses. God had promised to deliver the Israelites and bring them to the land of Canaan. He brought them out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Pharaoh and his armies were destroyed. Egypt lay in ruins. They sang for joy ... happy days are here again ... wrong song. They praised God for His deliverance.

But they were pretty proud and pleased with themselves. We're God's special people. We're going to go and meet God at Mt Sinai. They did what we all did when we were little. You have to have a bath before church. Clean out your ears, wash your hair, put on your Sunday, Saturday, best. Appear before God all clean and well groomed. But then God said ... don't come close to me ... don't touch my mountain ... keep your distance. On the basis of how good we are, we have no standing before God. We are just sinners, deserving only God's wrath. That's why the law and keeping the commandments can never save us. We can only come to God on His terms, and His terms are grace.

His way is through faith in the suffering and death of His Son, Jesus Christ. His way is through trusting that God, for Jesus' sake forgives your sins, and cleanses you from all unrighteousness. His way is through the blood of Jesus. His way is by means of the cross. Faith is more than a mere intellectual exercise. It's not just knowing the story and most of the right answers. The devil knows who Jesus is. He knows that Jesus died on the cross. He knows that judgement day is coming. None of that will save him. Knowing all of that won't save you either. Faith is the empty hand that takes hold of the promises of God. It trusts that God will do what He has said. That faith is life-changing. It caused Abraham to set out on a journey of new life, even though he didn't know where it would take him. When every earthly prop gave way, faith sustained him on the journey. Faith can change your life too. It brings a life of following Jesus, not always knowing where you are going, but trusting that Jesus is with you.