

By Faith
 Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 33:12-22
 Reading from the New Testament: Hebrews 11:1-3, 12-22

If I told you that I had run a race in Versailles, you'd be impressed, right? So cosmopolitan. The backdrop of the grand palace, the lush gardens that stretch out to the horizon; yes, I might ascend a step or two on your scale of sophistication if I told you I competed in a race in Versailles. ...I didn't ... but I did run a road race in Versailles ... Missouri, that is ... out there where we figure if you're going to expend the effort to add two Ls, you may as well use them (a rule that obviously doesn't apply to Gs, as in frettin', gettin', goin', and hopin', or that two-for-one deal – heapin' helpin'.)

Actually, it's a bit of a misnomer to say I ran a race **in** Versailles, because that would make for a very short race. So, 2/3 of the race transpired on a state highway outside of town, two miles out ... two miles back. The highway was flat. The highway was straight. While there are many advantages to running on a flat surface, it becomes a bit of a challenge when it is also straight. In such circumstances, you are not only wrestling with the heat from the asphalt, the crosswind that could blow you north to Iowa, the pounding on your joints, the stress on

your muscles, and the searing in your lungs; but you are also dealing with the despair of feeling you are not getting anyplace. That water tower way off in the distance is still way off in the distance. *Will I ever get there? Whose idea was this anyway?*

I've heard the same frustration from visitors to Vegas. They see some exotic hotel gleaming just down the strip – *It doesn't look that far. Why don't we just walk?* Yet, the more they walk, the further it seems they have to go. What started out as a short jaunt has become the Bataan death march under the desert sun.

I-95 between Richmond and D.C., creeping along between 10-15 mph. Surely traffic will thin out beyond that next curve, but beyond the next curve is a line of brake lights as far as the eye can see. You no longer want to get where you are going. You only want to go home.

Very often, life leaves us looking for the nearest exit ramp or at least some place to make a U-turn. We cry with Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “O Life, how oft we throw it off and think – ‘Enough, enough of life in so much.” (Browning, *Aurora Lee and other poems*) The drudgery of a job you don't like. The checkless checklist that condemns you with each

glance. That next chemo treatment, or worse, the one after that. The 12th rejection letter (if you hear the phrase *pursue another direction* one more time you may just pursue a long depression.) Attending too many funerals for people you love. Another deadline. Another past due notice. Another meeting. Another prescription. Another argument. Another mile. Another disappointment. Another headache. Another lonely night. Another Doctor's appointment. Another alarm bell. Another manic Monday.

Giving up or giving in has started to sound better than moving forward, sticking it out, hanging in there, persevering, going the distance, holding on. The rain keeps pelting, the floodwaters rise, and it appears Paul Simon's *Bridge Over Troubled Water* has washed out. And so, you stand on the threshold between abandoning hope and seeing how much more you can take.

Hebrews isn't so much an epistle as it is a message, a sermon if you will, directed to a people vulnerable to discouragement, doubt, and defeat. The road isn't rising to meet them but is vanishing like blacktop in a blizzard. Estrangement from their culture, their relatives. Persecution for their loyalty to the crucified one. It is becoming clear to

some that this whole discipleship thing isn't looking like the pamphlet they were given when they signed up. The turn of the century is just up ahead but the city of God keeps retreating into the horizon. Voices are murmuring: *This sure isn't heaven. Still looks like Roman hegemony to me. Is it too late to get a refund?*

And so, the author's task in Hebrews is to bring a word of validation, confirmation, encouragement, and challenge, that the reader may feel the strength to take the next step, that the truth of God's trustworthiness may be hold fast. The reader needs assurance that hearts broken by this world will be mended as the journey continues. The reader needs the conviction that the work of faith is not in vain. "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

To this end, the author puts before the reader a sort of homecoming parade, its floats depicting the lives of characters from the narrative of Israel's journey with God. Our text today hones in on the story of Abraham, upon whom is bestowed that most coveted of biblical epitaphs: "and this one as good as dead." Sounds like something I should wear on a t-shirt. I'm too old to put it on a resume, but I'd be

tempted. *And this one as good as dead.* Advanced in age, not really looking for a new career, Abraham and Sarah were at that stage in life where the confession, *I cannot bear children*, often carries two meanings, both of them true.

“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.” GPS is of limited value if you don’t even know the destination. “And he set out, not knowing where he was going.” Thirty-five years as a Presbyterian pastor has taught me this, you wouldn’t like that. *What do you mean we don’t know where we are going?* If I was to suggest something along those lines at the annual meeting of the congregation, there’d be so many groups clogging the parking lot, whispering and murmuring, that you’d abandon hope of getting your car to the exit. Presbyterians have never been known for our spontaneity. We want a committee. We want minutes. We want a report, an agenda, a feasibility study, and a campaign. We want a quorum, a motion, a second, a debate, and a vote to decide if we want to form a committee to begin discussions on a plan.

To the frustration of some, I've long resisted intense emphasis on a long-range plan, There are certainly good things that can come out of the process, and God can be in the midst of them, but (now don't tell anyone I said this) if a church becomes overly dependent on corporate models of planning it can become a form of prayer in which we are telling our Lord what we expect of God, even though we all know the way to make God laugh is to tell the Lord our plans.

I received an email this week from a para-church organization with ties to our denomination, that I found disappointing. It was an announcement concerning an impending planning process through which they will chart their future. It was filled with corporate-speak and organizational methodologies, but it contained no faith vocabulary, no reference to God or Jesus or the Spirit or scripture. I wanted to scream, *Come on, folks! It's the easiest question on an ordination exam! What is our chief end? To glorify God and enjoy God forever.* A plan is good, a plan is helpful, but before anything else, any plan must prioritize these things: keep our attention on Jesus, our nose in the scriptures, our eyes on the news, our ears listening to the community

around us, and our hearts open to the presence, direction, and windspeed of God's Spirit.

That Abraham didn't know where he was going didn't mean that he was aimless. He was paying attention and stepping forward in trust. In Genesis, the Lord tells Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.' So, Abraham set out, not knowing where he was going, and at an age that when napping, people automatically look to your chest to see if you're still breathing. But Abraham set out, armed only with a promise. There would be challenges, missteps, mistakes, tests, ordeals, losses, laughs, and hopes. And if at the end of his days, you were to ask Abraham how far it was to his destination, he could only confess he didn't know, but that there had been enough signs along the road to suggest he was at least on the way, and it was worth attempting that next step.

Our author puts it this way: Abraham "looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God." In spite of all evidence to the contrary, Abraham kept walking because "he considered him faithful who had promised." As the old sacred hymn intones: "and

resting on His goodness, I lose my doubts and fears; Though by the path He leadeth, but one step I may see.”

Some days, it seems God’s construction project is so far in the distance that we despair of ever getting there. Last week Donna and I had the opportunity to gather with friends at the Muslim Community Center. Many of you know that 7 years ago I traveled to Turkey through an organization called Hizmet (the Turkish word for service). The aim of this Islamic organization is the promotion of education, humanitarian activism, and interfaith dialogue, all aims that would also highlight the ministry of Christ’s church. The Hizmet organization has established schools, hospitals, and disaster relief structures across the globe. Another Turkish word that defines their aim is *hosguru*, the translation being – *empathetic pluralistic engagement*.

However, with Turkey’s drift from democracy to autocracy and its attending human rights abuses, Turkey’s president viewed *Hizmet’s* aims to pose a challenge to his grasp for power, and therefore declared the movement to be an enemy of the state, thus following the playbook for building an autocracy. The common elements of the authoritarian’s playbook include these steps: weaponize fear; target outsiders;

undermine institutions; erode truth by portraying a free press as the enemy of the people; inflame divisions through hate speech, intimidation, imprisonment, and violence.

3000 *Hizmet* sponsored schools and universities were forced to close in Turkey. 190 independent media outlets were shut down or taken over. 190,000 people lost their jobs, and Turkey now has more journalists imprisoned than any other country in the world, including Russia and China. Our local friends managed to escape, but everybody knows somebody who has been persecuted or imprisoned, all for being faithful to our common calling to love our neighbor, work for the reconciliation of the world, and reduce suffering around the globe. And yet, they still worship. They still step forward in faith.

We see the hostile move toward authoritarianism in Russia, China, Latin America, Africa, and have been wrestling with similar and persistent hostilities in our own land. This week I read of a recent poll conducted by an independent Russian research organization called Levada, that has, not surprisingly, been blacklisted by the state. The poll showed that 10% of the Russian population has experienced torture by law-enforcement agencies at some point. We see the targeting of

women and children with shelling from the sky and abuses on the ground in Ukraine.

There seems to be a rising culture of cruelty spreading at a covid-like pace across the globe. Domestic abuse is no longer a crime in Russia. Girls are being forbidden from school in Afghanistan. Women in the U.S. are seeing a retraction of rights. The earth itself is under attack by human greed and negligence. It is easy to get discouraged, to be consumed by cynicism, to see any landmark of hope retreating into the horizon. The apostle Paul said, “Faith, hope, love, abide these three, but the greatest of these is love.” Was he being sarcastic, or is it true?”

Why gather? Why worship? Why serve? Why walk the way of discipleship? Is it worth it to keep going? Well, this week an Islamic Turkish toddler reached up to give me a high five. This week in a remote corner of Knott County, KY, state and FEMA representatives hadn't made it to the area, but Havana Thacker had already transformed a historic high school into a supply depot and begun delivering meals and supplies up steep, rocky one-way roads, not because she had to, but because it was the right thing to do, and though exhausted, she would not, could not stop.

In Arkansas, a young mom was having a bad day. Many of you have lived it. Swim practice. Two young children. Simultaneous meltdowns. "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?" A stranger came out of nowhere, handed the mom a note and a word of encouragement, saying "You've got this." The note said, "Your life and purpose are huge!! Life is so precious. Every day is a gift, so make it count. Enjoy!!" She got home and realized that tucked in the note was a \$100. What is it we say here? *You are blessed to be a blessing.*

Even when we don't know the distance to our destination, we can trust the faithfulness of God, the grace of Christ, and the presence of God's Spirit. We can risk and we can endure that next step.

I think it wise, periodically, for us to revisit and reclaim the prayer of the great mystic, Thomas Merton: "My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if

I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore, will I trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.” There is always an ally when we risk that next step. Amen.