

Travel by Faith

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 19
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Sunday, August 8, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Genesis 15:1-6; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I recall that one of my daughters, when she was quite young, had a summertime shirt and shorts set I liked to call her “traveling outfit.” The front of the shirt had a picture of a dog family, riding in a car. Then there were three questions printed out which encircled the shirt from front to back. The words read, “Where are we going? When will we get there? When do we eat?” These are the things children naturally ask, over and over, *ad nauseum*, when going somewhere. These are their traveling questions. I think all humans ask such questions. Maybe not in those exact words, but don’t you and I often have traveling questions about life’s journey? Questions like: How do I resolve this problem of mine? Where will I find the (fill in the blank) energy, time, money? How can I keep (fill in the blank) myself, my family, my community safe in this world which is so oft-times scary? What will the doctor say to me tomorrow? How can I become financially independent on my income? Will my position in the company be eliminated? What’s the best decision I can make here, given all the options? When will the (fill in the blank) tears, pain, hurting, anger stop? What should I be when I grow up? Does anyone love me? Why should I care about anything?

Even people who don’t appear to be traveling at all can have traveling questions. This afternoon several of us from Trinity will lead a worship service at Dauphin County Prison with some male inmates. Confined to prison cells, they most assuredly have traveling questions: When will I get out? Will I fall into the same (fill in the blank) temptations, bad habits, bad crowd? When I do get out, is there anyone out there waiting for me who cares about me? What will I do with my life?

Questions like these have been asked by our parents and their parents before them. People from every time and place. We might suppose we have our lives, our particular situations fairly well in hand, but travel questions still dog us, encircle us, just as they did my child’s shirt. For just when we think we’ve discovered the answer to a few of those questions, new ones pop up!

Some of these traveling questions can even test our faith. Simply the anxiety we feel in the questions themselves can bring us to moments where faith in God’s presence and power is required, but may seem in short supply. Thus producing more questions like: Where is God right now? Will God respond to me with these concerns I have? Does God care?

Well, Abram in our first lesson from Genesis is traveling—and is wearing his traveling outfit! He has traveling questions! Prior to this chapter in Genesis, Abram (better known and later known as Abraham) has been commanded by the Lord God

to go to a new land that the Lord is going to give him. God made specific promises to him about this land, and about the descendants that Abraham would eventually have who will live in this land. Sounds good, but the journey is fraught with questions, and Abraham isn't totally sure he's getting answers to them: Where are we going? When will we get there? What's going to happen? The questions come because the promises haven't yet been fulfilled—or even made the least bit visible to Abraham. He has no idea when they will be fulfilled; he only has God's word of promise.

The disciples in our Gospel are in a similar predicament. Again, just prior to the verses we have today from Luke, you'll find Jesus voicing what the disciples are experiencing, which are their own anxious travel questions. Essentially they are asking, "Where are we going? When will get there? When do we eat?" And you know that's what they are asking because, beginning at chapter 12, verse 22, Jesus says to them: "...do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear..." How human those disciples are. Doesn't matter they are in the presence of Jesus their teacher. Doesn't matter that they've witnessed miracles from his hands, seen healings done by him. Doesn't matter, because travel questions come up in their minds as they consider their own lives and situations. They do worry about their future, what tomorrow holds for them.

But our second lesson begins with these powerful words: *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.* Clearly, this was the situation for both Abraham and Sarah, and Jesus' disciples. Trusting the Lord, even when they were only clinging to promises. Being called into a relationship with God, even though filled with questions.

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews says faith is as elusive and intangible as that, and yet at the same time declares faith makes real all these things God promises. See, where we hear "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for..." that word "assurance" means something like "gives substance to." So faith gives substance to things hoped for. Faith makes even the intangible real for us now.

Professor Bryan Whitfield of Mercer University suggests that the writer of Hebrews is saying there are really two dimensions to faith. The first is this: "...faithfulness is holding fast to the promises of God." He likens God's promises and gracious word to us as the peg you hang your hat on. The stories Jesus tells of God's love for his creation, the story of Jesus' own life and death and resurrection, the words we proclaim to one another are the thing we hang our faith on. We're not dreaming up these stories; rather, we find our grounding in the word of God reaching out to his children.

Ahh, but what do we do **with** our traveling questions? Well, it's vital we bring those questions to the One whose story we hang our hat on. Look, Abraham shares his travel questions with the Lord. He wonders aloud if maybe Eliezer, a slave born in his household, will be the heir of what God will give to Abraham. God's promised Abraham and Sarah their own child, but that doesn't appear to be happening anytime soon, so of course Abraham wonders and worries and asks God

traveling questions. That's when God reiterates the promise, brings that gracious word again to Abraham so he can hang his faith on it once more. The Lord God says: *Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them. So shall your descendants be.*

The disciples, too, hear words of promise. Jesus says to them in the midst of all their worrying: *Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.*

Okay, so one dimension of living out our faith **is** holding tight to the promises God gives us, and taking those pesky anxious travel questions of ours right to him in prayer, bible study and reflection, in confession and worship. But the second dimension of faith, says Whitfield, is this: Faith always moves us forward. We are not to remain stationary, either in the paralysis of fear or the sedentary nature of complacency. God's promises always have a call attached to them. Abraham and Sarah were promised land and descendants. But they were called to go where God sent them. And as for the disciples—they were told not to be afraid, and then were called by Jesus to follow him. God is always calling us forward into the future with him. And in faith we are to obey.

Now, some of us are very good at holding fast, but never moving forward. The Church is often like this. Getting mired in the day-to-day maintenance details that are understood as part of our faithfulness to God. Getting complacent about our mission in the context of our surrounding community and the world. Plus you and I as individuals can spend a lot of time saying, "One of these days I'm going to..." in terms of a movement forward in faith that is somewhat a risk-taking. Like serving in a particular ministry or sharing your faith with someone else and telling them where God has been present for you. Like moving beyond our comfort zone to do a Christ-like deed or give a Christ-like response. We say, "One of these days I'm going to..." but we don't. That's when we may very well have a peg to hang our faith on, but we never do anything else with it.

That's why the second dimension of faith—that of moving forward as a response to God's call that always comes—is so critical.

But then again, some of us move forward without listening and thinking, reflection and discernment, study and prayer. We don't spend time in that first dimension of faith, that foundation-building for the faith that God's word can provide. For example, the Church can flit from activity to activity, without purpose, without seeking the direction from God, almost mindless, and thus it risks not being obedient and not being fruitful. Or, as individuals, we throw ourselves headlong into a situation without allowing time for God's word to be made known, time for us to understand our role in the bigger picture of God's work in the world. So we risk becoming frustrated when nothing seems to change, for all our frenetic activity. We risk being destructive when we move forward with our own selfish intent, not God's intent. And believe it or not, our "good intentions" can sometimes be acts of unintentional disobedience.

So we actually need both dimensions of faithfulness—a willingness to hold fast to God’s promises, and a deliberate, constant moving forward into the future where God will continue to meet us. Or as writer Joni Eareckson Tada states, “Faith isn’t the ability to believe long and far into the misty future. It’s simply taking God at his word and taking the next step.” Now, that’s the way to travel. **AMEN.**