

**+ Hebrews 11:1-2, 8-16 + Look Forward to the Unseen with Hope! +
+ 12th Sunday after Pentecost + 16 August 2015 +**

Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Abraham was a pretty impressive guy. He came from a wealthy family originally from a big city called Ur in southeastern Iraq. Back then, he was known as Abram. He married a beautiful woman 10 years younger named Sarai. They loved each other and unlike Abram's father Terah, who worshiped the moon-god, they worshiped the true God. Yet the Lord in his wisdom didn't give them any kids—a source of concern for year to come.

While in Ur, Abram's brother died leaving his son Lot to Abram's care. Shortly thereafter, Abram's father packed up the entire family and all their belongings and set out for the West—the fertile land of Canaan along the Mediterranean Sea, but they only made it to the caravan city of Haran. They settled there and eventually Terah died at the ripe old age of 205!

Abram is 75 when we first encounter him in the Bible. His wife Sarai is 65—both relatively young compared to his father, but not necessarily the age when you first leave home. In fact, you'd probably expect Abram to stay settled there in Haran building his wealth, but that's not what God wanted.

The Lord wanted Abram to go someplace he had never seen, to travel to a region he had never visited, but had only heard about from caravans passing through Haran. The Lord was quite clear with his instructions, **“Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.”** (Genesis 12:1) Like I said, 75 years of age is not necessarily the age we think of when a person first leaves home.

Now if we were in Abram's sandals, I'm sure we'd have all kinds of questions and objections. “Go where? You want me to do what? Why leave all this behind when what I have here is safe and familiar and easy?” But all we hear from Moses' account is **“So Abram left, as the LORD had told him...”** (Genesis 12:4) Abram packed up his wife and nephew and all their servants and flocks and herds and possessions and headed west with no idea where God was leading them.

Pretty impressive when you think about it! Almost like a pioneer back in the 1800s. You and I don't go anywhere unknown without a GPS or a map, but here you have Abram and his family going to an unknown location simply trusting that God knew where they were going.

He and his family and his possessions settled in Canaan. Why? Because the Lord's promises were also clear. **“I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”** (Genesis 12:2-3) Eventually God promised that land to Abram's descendants. So Abram confidently trusted that God would keep his promises.

Rather than move to the safety of one of the cities, they chose to live in tents as nomads guiding vast flocks of sheep and goats and herds of cattle and camels through barren wilderness and fertile pasturelands. The Lord blessed Abram and his nephew Lot so richly that the land could not sustain all of their flocks and herds and servants together. So they separated with Abram granting his nephew the more fertile land while he went to the barren wilderness. Yet even then God kept blessing Abram—more wealth, more flocks, more servants, even a greater reputation. You see, Abram and 318 of his trained servants took down the powerful armies of 4 pagan kings who had captured his nephew and all the people and wealth of Lot's town.

Abram was a pretty impressive guy whose name the Lord eventually changed to Abraham, which means “Father of Nations.” You see, Abraham would have descendants like the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore. The Lord had promised that all nations on earth would be blessed through Abraham's descendant, One who would descend from Abraham and Sarah's son, but they were getting old and still had no kids.

At age 90, the Lord had to reassure his servant that a son would come. At age 99, the Lord did it again in person—and each time Abraham believed the Lord. Think about that! Abraham was 99. Sarah was 89. They had never had any children together, but when the Lord promised a son, Abraham trusted that the Lord had the power to do what he had promised—and that's exactly what God did. At the ripe old age of 100 with Sarah at 90, the Lord gave them that long-promised son—a little boy whose name means laughter, that laughter of joy because God keeps his promises.

Abraham was a pretty impressive guy, wasn't he? I could go on about how he publicly honored the true God after the defeat of the 4 kings, how the Lord made a covenant of grace with Abraham that the line of the promised Savior would come through his family, how the Lord had asked him to sacrifice his son Isaac and how he didn't question what God had told him, but trusted that the Lord knew what he was doing even providing a substitute for Isaac. I could tell you how Abraham looked forward to the unseen fulfillment of God's promises with confident hope. Perhaps that would make you feel guilty like it does me, because, "I haven't trusted God like that."

Well, the truth is, Abraham was just like you and me—not always so impressive because of sin. I could tell you how on two separate occasions, he passed off his wife as his beautiful sister because he feared what an earthly ruler could do to him in spite of God's promises. I could tell you how Abraham listened to his wife, who was discouraged by her lack of a child and tried to force God's hand by giving her maidservant to Abraham to give him a child. I could tell you how Abraham's faith and confidence in God faltered and wavered over the course of 25 years much like yours and mine has done over the years. Yet every time that Abraham failed, the Lord refocused his heart and mind back to those beautiful promises of grace unseen—a promised land, a vast nation of people, a Savior who would bless every nation, a heavenly city and an unseen country unlike anything on this earth.

In the end, Abraham trusted in God's promises being sure of what he hoped for and certain of what he did not see. He went to Canaan and settled in tents because **"he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God."** He trusted in God's promises not just of a son, but of countless descendants like sand and stars **"because he considered him faithful who had made the promise."**

He looked forward to the unknown day when his descendant Jesus many generations later would walk the same dusty roads and would teach in the same fertile pasturelands, who would be that substitute sacrifice whose blood would be shed not just for Isaac or his own guilt, but for all nations and every descendant even you and me. So he longed **"for a better country—a heavenly one"** and a heavenly city that God would graciously give him.

It's easy to look at Abraham's life and be impressed by it. Then you look at your own life and you feel underwhelmed by how unimpressive yours is when it comes to confident hope in God's promises. I know I do. How often don't you find yourself afraid, worried, anxious, and untrusting of God's promises for the unseen future? It's so easy to become cynical and pessimistic about the unseen future—of where God will take you in this life or what blessings and challenges he has waiting for you. However, when you take a closer look at that attitude, isn't it faithlessness—an unwillingness to trust that God can and will keep all his promises to you? That's not really faith, is it? **"...Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for."** Faith doesn't have to see God keep his promises. It simply trusts that he will in his own time!

In this congregation, we of all people should know that well. Look back on the past 40 years and you'll see how the Lord has taught us that lesson over and over and over and over again. All you have to do is look back on the story of this building project. God keeps his promises and blesses his people in his own time, which is always when it is best for us.

Amazingly, that's what Abraham and the Old Testament believers excelled at. They had no choice because most of them would never see the first coming of Jesus. **"They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them...from a distance"** yet they trusted that God would keep his promises—and of course, he did! **"When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law to redeem those under law that we might receive the full rights of sons."** (Galatians 4:4-5)

Jesus came—a full-blooded descendant of Abraham, yet also true God, just as God promised. He was born in Bethlehem, just as God promised. He healed the sick, cast out demons, raised the dead, and proclaimed freedom to the captives, just as God promised. He established a new covenant of grace and forgiveness between God and humanity based solely on what he would do for us and not on what we would do for him, just as God promised. Like a lamb for sacrifice, his innocent blood was willingly shed on a cross for your guilt and mine, for our worry, our anxiety, our faithlessness, just as God promised. Then he abandoned his tomb three days later and did not see decay, just as God promised. Now he sits at God's right hand ruling all things for your good, just as God promised. Do you hear a theme?

If that's not enough, recall how the Lord of free and faithful grace has kept his promises to you! Yes, you! We could spend all day talking about those promises fulfilled, but here's just a few. Do you have guilt? Jesus

forgives you with his blood poured out on the cross. Are you troubled? Jesus brings you peace for your heart. Do you grieve? Jesus dries your tears with the comfort of the resurrection. Do you hurt? Jesus heals you. Are you sad? Jesus brings you real joy. Are you anxious about God's timing? Jesus gives you patience. Do you wonder why you're here? Jesus gives you purpose. Do you worry, get fearful, or easily slip down the slope into faithlessness? Jesus gives you confident hope in every promise fulfilled—including the last one. You know what I mean! The heavenly city, the better country, the New Jerusalem, Paradise, Home. You haven't seen it yet, but Jesus is preparing to bring you there someday!

That Abraham was a pretty impressive guy, wasn't he? But only because of what the Lord did for him. The same is true for you. His God, who is also your God, is most impressive of all. With confident hope, look forward to what the Lord has promised and recall what you learned from Abraham today. God guides your life and where you will go. God will keep his promises to you in his own time. Above all, God has a heavenly city, a better country for you as you travel on life's pilgrimage. In Christ alone, then, look forward to the unseen future with confident hope! Amen.

Therefore God is not ashamed to be called our God for he has prepared a city for us. Amen.