

Proper 14C: Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16  
Church of the Good Shepherd  
The Rev. W. Terry Miller  
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### **Restless Faith**

“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” For Christians, this is the “go-to” definition of faith. If you want to know, or if someone asks you what faith is, and you go to your Bible, to the concordance in the back, this passage from Hebrews will surely be at the top of the list of verses.

But I don’t know about you. I don’t find this definition particularly helpful. It’s as elusive and ambiguous as the word it defines. I mean, what are these “things not seen”? What hopes are “assured”? How do we get this “conviction”? Hebrews doesn’t say. Does it concern belief in God...or the Loch Ness monster and UFOs? The “hope that is assured,” does that include the wish to win the lottery? As far as explanations go, this one leaves much to be desired, leaves a lot open for interpretation.

More often than not, in everyday usage, “faith” is thought of as being the opposite of reason. Faith is how we believe in something that has no objective basis, “for which there is no proof,” as the dictionary has it. But from that perspective, one could “have faith” that Pluto is made of bleu cheese, or that the city of Richmond will grind to a halt tomorrow on account of a freak snowstorm. One might argue that faith in God is of a different sort than those outlandish examples. But that doesn’t stop people from dismissing the existence of God for the same reason they dismiss sightings of Bigfoot—because there’s no rational, irrefutable, empirical evidence, no “proof.”

And the way we Christian talk about faith doesn’t help, either. Often, we make faith out to be a matter of agreeing to a list of propositions, a mental assent to certain articles of belief—the Virgin Birth, the Trinity, the bread and wine becoming Jesus’ Body and Blood. And often the argument goes, if you don’t accept these statements as truth, then you don’t have faith. This leads unhelpfully to many doubters and sincere questioners being counted out as people of faith.

But believing in things without proof and assent to a bunch of propositions aren’t the only ways to understand faith, or even the best. Faith, I think, is better understood as a verb than as a noun, as a process rather than as a possession. It is an on-again-off-again thing, not something you *have* as much as something you *do*, less a place to dwell in and more of a journey.

I know that metaphor—faith as a journey—is an overused cliché. But it gets at an important aspect of faith: that it’s not static, but a living thing, restless, in motion. Rather than something we cling to, faith is a seeking out, a searching, a going forward as on a journey, a journey without a map, where you’re not sure where you are going, but you’re going anyway.

This is in fact how the writer of Hebrews characterizes faith. After the vague definition that started our passage, the writer puts some meat on the bone by citing the example of Abraham, the

patriarch and progenitor of the people of Israel. Abraham is an example of faith precisely because he left his home and the comforts he knew there, to go where God called him. God didn't give Abraham a lot of information or explain what was going to happen to him when he got there, only told him to "go," and promised in the end to make him the father of a great nation and a blessing to all peoples. And on that promise alone, Abraham went, uprooted his family and his life and traveled to a foreign land over a thousand miles away, at God's command.

But it wasn't just that Abraham was willing to move, to venture to the place God called him. His faith is also evident in that he never received the reward for his obedience, the fulfillment of that promise. He had faith to do what God asked, and he got to see part of the promise, the beginnings of a great nation, in the birth of a son. But Abraham didn't live to enjoy its full fruit; he never got to claim the land that had been prepared for him. Though Abraham waited his whole life for the fulfillment of the promise, for a lasting dwelling place, he died a nomad, longing for his true home.

This seeking for a permanent and secure dwelling place is not unique to Abraham. Indeed, the loss of and search for "home" has characterized humanity from the beginning, ever since the first humans were forced to leave their Garden home, to venture forth into the unknown. As their descendants spread throughout the world, the longing to find home, to settle, to stay put, endured. And so as Adam and Eve's children went out, they established towns and great cities and constructed the Tower of Babel as a monument not only to humanity's ingenuity but to their desire for something permanent. But God ended that arrogant project, confusing their language, and sent them scattering again. Eventually the whole lot of them were washed off the board in the flood, with Noah and his family the lone survivors sailing towards a new land. So, human history, the way the Bible tells it, was never to be a tame, ordered, stay-at-home affair. It is an anxious searching, a deep longing for something we miss but never knew.

This pursuit of a new home was at the forefront of the next chapter of the story, the Exodus, when God lead his people out of Egypt, out of slavery, into the Promised Land, the "land of milk and honey." Only, their stay there didn't last long. A few centuries later they were uprooted again, on account of their disobedience and faithlessness, exiled to Babylon, where they lived as strangers in a strange land. When, generations later, the Jews were allowed to return, many chose to stay. They had settled in Babylon, made their peace with the pagan Babylonian ways. Those who chose to leave, to move once again, had kept alive the hope for something better, a better home, and set off again to find it.

This recounting of Israel's peregrinations, their wanderings, is striking, given Israel's preoccupation with the Promised Land, how it has been central to the identity and calling of God's people. For, the witness of the Old Testament is that if you are part of God's people, you should not get too settled, too comfortable, because you'll have to relocate again before you know it.

We shouldn't be too surprised then to find that the Gospels present Jesus as being on the move, on a perpetual road trip. Jesus is always moving, going from one place to another, in Galilee, Samaria, Judea, on foot and in boats, crisscrossing the Sea of Galilee. "Birds have nests and foxes have holes," Jesus says, "but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." And his

followers are presented in just that way—as “followers,” not just metaphorically but literally, following wherever Jesus goes. They don’t just sit at his feet, taking accurate notes. They move with Jesus, attempting to keep up with him as he goes from place to place.

It begins with Jesus saying to them, “follow me,” and it continues all the way to Jerusalem and the cross. Even after he dies, Jesus won’t stay put, walking with them disciples on the road to Emmaus, appearing to them on the Damascus Road, meeting believers as they go about, with his followers moving with him, going to places that we wouldn’t otherwise go unless he brought them there.

I’m saying all this because, let’s be honest, there’s something in us too that longs to settle down in one place, put down roots, build something lasting. I mean, look at us here today. We sit in our bolted-down pews, in our solid brick, older-looking-than-it-is church building. An outsider looking at us might come to the erroneous conclusion that the purpose of the church is to bolt things down, so to speak—to get fixed, to settle down, to attain a “firm and unshakeable faith,” as we sometime say.

But as the writer of Hebrews reminds us, being a follower of Jesus is a good deal more exciting than that! Indeed, Hebrews’ portrayal of faith is that it’s a journey, a pilgrimage, an adventure. We come here on Sundays not to settle down, settle in, having come at last to a satisfying end of our search. We come here rather to catch our breath, to catch a glimpse of the vision, to summon up the intestinal fortitude, and then venture forth, not knowing precisely where God is leading us, or what it will take to get there.

This perspective was one, as a matter of fact, that was embraced by the Celtic Church, the church of the ancient Irish, Scottish and Welsh. Celtic Christians, it seems, were always on the move, in groups or alone. And, wherever they went, these Celtic pilgrims preached, taught, baptized and buried, and they set up monasteries along the way, in Scotland and England and as far abroad as Iceland and Italy. Theirs was a powerful witness and their wanderings helped to spread the Gospel throughout Europe.

But it was more than an evangelistic strategy. Behind their restlessness was a sense that their moving about was itself a spiritual discipline. The Christian life, they understood, is one of continual conversions, of moving on, and of never-ending transformation of the old into the new. Their travels were then the outward expression of an inward change, a metaphor and symbol for that journey towards deeper faith and greater holiness, which is the Christian life. To be a pilgrim was to recognize that in this transitory world, we have no abiding city.

Perhaps no one articulated this view better than St. Columba, who likened life to a road and pointed to the dangers of being distracted on the journey. As he said in one of his sermons, “Let us not love the road rather than the land to which it leads, lest we lose our homeland altogether. For we have such a home that we ought to love it.” He made his point clear: “It is the end of the road. *That* is the end of our lives, that we should be always thinking about; the end of the road is our true home.”

Like the Celtic saints in their travels, we Christians know not where the road will take us, but we know what our destination is, and so we should always keep that in mind and not let ourselves be distracted by stops along the way. This is especially important for those of us who are pretty settled in, who see ourselves as established, who've made a home here. It reminds us we shouldn't get too comfortable, shouldn't root ourselves too deeply or hold on too tight. Because we are still on a journey, we are not at our destination yet. Even if we believe our days of adventure are past, even if we consider ourselves "as good as dead," like Abraham, we've not reached the Promised Land. God has yet more in store for us.

In the book *Iberia*, James Michener describes the medieval pilgrims who traveled from France to Spain's Cathedral of Santiago. As the pilgrims neared the end of their demanding trip, they would strain to see the towers of the long-sought cathedral in the distance. The first one to see it, says Michener, would shout, "My joy!" Abraham and those who have gone before us never made it to their destination, but they saw the towers of the heavenly city on the horizon. And their shouts of "My joy!" serve to stir our hearts and strengthen our steps as we make our own way there. Even if we don't make it before the end of our earthly pilgrimage, someday soon we will, with all God's people, reach our destination, which is our eternal home, the City of God. Such is the promise and perfection of our faith. Thanks be to God!