

Sermon by Rev. Michael J. Hoyt  
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church  
19<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
August 19, 2001

**“Sojourners in the Promised Land”**  
**Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16**

The book discussion group that has been meeting recently  
here at Glenshaw Church  
is studying the book *Paradoxes for Living* by Graham Standish  
who led the congregational retreat here in March.

The book deals with the seeming contradictions that characterize  
the Christian faith, such as

To be strong, we have to be weak  
To save our lives, we have to lose them  
To become mature, we have to become like children  
To receive, we have to give

In one chapter, “Pain as the Pathway to Joy”,  
Standish opens with a quote he uses whenever he is asked  
why there is so much pain and suffering in the world.  
The saying is, “No one gets out of life alive”

Part of the Christian way of life is learning to live with the reality  
that even as people of faith, people who walk with God,  
we will encounter pain, struggle, suffering and finally death,  
and that these not just part of life,  
they are a part of the Christian journey itself.<sup>1</sup>

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Abraham and Sarah wrestled mightily with this paradox.  
They were sojourners in the promised land.  
You remember the story in Genesis:  
God gives Abraham and Sarah a command,  
and attached to that command is a promise.  
God commands Abraham to “Go to the place that I will show you.”  
And God promises Abraham he will receive a new land as an inheritance,  
and not only the land, but a great progeny to inherit the land after him.  
So Abraham packs up his family, all his belongings, his livestock  
and sets out, leaving his homeland behind.  
He accepts the promise of God and hastens on  
as one who has been sent to receive a blessing.

What makes this even more amazing  
is that this husband and wife do not know where they are going,  
just that God has sent them and that God has promised

to show them the way.

I don't know how many of you have moved recently –  
but I have moved recently,  
and I took two trips to Pittsburgh and Glenshaw  
to check the place out;  
and I sent my wife up to stay a few days to get an impression  
and to see if she thought she could live here.  
And we spent several days looking at houses  
with lots of people helping.  
And even with that, picking up and leaving one place to move to another  
was a fearsome challenge!

But when God commands Abraham and Sarah to pick up and move,  
they do not know where they are going,  
just that God has promised to show them the way.  
By faith Abraham and Sarah become sojourners, searching for the blessing  
of the promise of God.

And they enter the land of promise,  
the land of high hopes and great expectations, trusting God to bless them  
but it is as a foreign land to them, and they live in tents  
wandering from place to place.

The book of Hebrews, in commending Abraham and Sarah's faith,  
doesn't even tell the whole story – things are even worse.

More than once they have to leave the promised land:  
first because of a famine in the land,  
and another time out of fear for his life,  
Abraham is compelled to pick up and move his family  
back out of the promised land, hoping one day to return.

We have to wonder if it ever occurred to this couple that God had in fact  
deceived them.

Where is that inheritance for which we have hoped?  
Why are we still living in tents, and hungry?  
Is this what we get for committing our lives to follow God?  
Here we are in the promised land, but we are sojourners, nomads,  
wandering around, kicked around, and homeless.

The condition of a sojourner is contrary to the promise.  
yet even so, Abraham and Sarah obey. They go when God says go.

\* \* \* \* \*

Living with the distance between the promise of God and our reality  
is the essence of faith.

John Calvin ponders this paradox in his commentary on Hebrews.

He writes that

“The Spirit of God shows us hidden things,  
the knowledge of which cannot reach our senses.  
Eternal life is promised to us,  
but it is promised to the dead;  
we are told of the resurrection of the blessed,  
but meantime we are involved in corruption;  
we are declared to be just,  
yet sin dwells within us;  
we hear that we are blessed,  
but meantime we are overwhelmed by untold miseries;  
we are promised an abundance of all good things,  
but we are often hungry and thirsty;  
God proclaims that He will come to us immediately,  
but seems to be deaf to our cries.  
What would happen to us if we did not rely on our hope,  
and if our minds did not emerge above the world  
out of the midst of darkness  
through the shining Word of God and by His Spirit?”<sup>ii</sup>

*Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*

This familiar verse is, in fact, a difficult one to translate from the Greek.

Many scholars believe it should be translated differently, saying,

*Faith is the reality of things hoped for,  
the demonstration of things not seen.*

Faith itself, *our faith*, is the evidence of God's goodness, God's promises.

How can the world know that God is good?

Look at the church. Look at the men and women who have faith.

A demonstration makes things appear.

In our believing,

in our faithful living, God's promises appear before the world's eyes.

*Faith is the reality of things hoped for,  
the demonstration of things not seen.*

Think about how you yourself have come to faith.

Was it because of something you read in a book?

Because of some private experience when no one else was around?

Or was it because a person – someone in your life – demonstrated to you  
the goodness of God?

Was it because someone else's faith became for you

the reality of God's grace in your life

so that you yourself were able to have faith?

*Our faith is the REALITY of things hoped for,*

*the DEMONSTRATION of things not seen.*

Our faith becomes the evidence of God's goodness,

when the circumstances of our life cry out that God does not exist,  
or even worse, that God does not care.

By faith we join with Abraham and Sarah as sojourner's in the promised land,  
because we have tasted the goodness of God  
and believe the promise to be true.

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Not long ago, the Labyrinth was introduced in this congregation  
as a method of prayer and spiritual discernment.  
If you haven't seen it, it's a giant, spiraling maze painted on a canvas  
that spreads out on the floor.  
The Labyrinth has been passed down to us from the ancient church  
as a way of meditating upon the journey of the Christian life.  
Walking through the twists and turns of the Labyrinth  
and finding the way to the center,  
the Christian sojourner joins together with the great pilgrims of the faith,  
like Abraham and Sarah,  
who set out without knowing where they were going,  
but trusted that God stands at the center of this journey,  
and is able to fulfill the promise of blessing.

Christian sojourners,  
whether walking on the Labyrinth canvass  
or walking on the canvass of our lives,  
have a wide diversity of experiences.  
We each bring a different story to the journey of faith,  
and in our prayers God meets us with different blessings.  
But the longer we speak the language of faith,  
the more clear it becomes that we are in fact nomads on this earth,  
*seeking a homeland,*  
*desiring a better country,*  
*that is, a heavenly one.*

Ultimately, the hope of the Christian faith is that God's promises  
will outlast even death,  
And the *faith* of those who believe is the evidence in this world  
that our heavenly homeland exists.  
Our words and our actions based on God's promises,  
even in the face of circumstances that scream out in denial of God's promises,  
are the demonstration of the kingdom of God to the world.  
Our words and actions based on God's promises  
are the demonstration that the God who created the world  
can create a new world for us out of the pain & struggle  
of our present existence.

So we press on in faith, sojourners in the promised land,  
with the conviction that we will one day see God's blessing.  
And we press on with the assurance that we are not travelling alone.  
For as we go,

the pioneer and perfecter of our faith goes with us every step of the way.  
Jesus, whose faithfulness is THE evidence, THE demonstration  
of God's goodness,  
goes with us.

So in closing, listen to the words Jesus spoke to his disciples  
as he was preparing to depart from the earth.  
*In my Father's house there are many dwelling places.  
If it were not so would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?  
And if I go and prepare a place for you,  
I will come again and take you to myself,  
so that where I am  
there you may be also...*  
*...So you have pain now;  
but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice,  
and no one will take your joy from you. (John 14:2-3; 16:22)*

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<sup>i</sup> *Paradoxes for Living*, Graham Standish. (Westminster John Knox, 2001) p. 47-48.

<sup>ii</sup> *Hebrews and 1 and 2 Peter*, Calvin's New Testament Commentaries (Eerdmans, 1963) p. 157.