

Are We There Yet?
Aug. 7, 2016
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
Rev. John Cleghorn
Text: Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-21

“Are we there yet?”

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If little kids had a battle cry for summer, that would be it, wouldn't it?

“Are we there . . . **yet?**”

I know my sister and I asked that more than once on our various long-distance drives when we were kids. First in a 1965 VW bug, then in a '68 Chevy Impala and then, after my folks were divorced, in a '72 Ford LTD.

That last one also let us down on more than one occasion. In those years, my mother, my sister and I would make the 7-hour drive to my grandparents' farm in Mississippi several times a year. Atlanta to Rienzi, Mississippi was nothing but two-lane highways connecting one small city or town to the next. And, more than once, we found ourselves broken down, most often somewhere in Alabama.

What I learned in those years was to have faith . . . in God, yes, but also in people. Every time we would break down, a good old boy would show up. Usually a local. Usually with a friend who was a mechanic, and a good one. It might take an hour or two. But through God's grace and the kindness of strangers, we would be back on the road to the farm before it was too late at night.

Yes, I asked, “Are we there yet?” a few times in those years. But I never asked, “Will someone stop to help us? Will we be OK?” By watching my mother and by witnessing the generosity of every-day people, I learned to have faith in other people, people today that I would probably have very little in common with.

“Are we there yet?”

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In their own way, that's what the first century Christians were asking at the time that the New Testament book known as Hebrews was written. We don't really know who wrote it. The famous first-century historian Origen wrote that “Only God knows.”

But we do know what they were going through. They were converts to the Jesus way. And they apparently paid the price for it. They were shunned by their fellow gentiles, who stuck to their

pagan ways. And they were persecuted by the Romans for following Jesus and his unfortunate habit of pointing out the flaws of human rulers relative to the one Divine ruler.

Christ Jesus had lived, taught and preached, died and was resurrected. Christ had promised his return. And the recipients of this letter were getting anxious to see him again. In fact, some were considering taking up Judaism and giving up on Jesus all together.

“Are we there yet?”

For them, that meant, “Haven’t we waited long enough, yet?”

“Haven’t we suffered persecution for believing in Jesus Christ enough?”

“Haven’t we kept the faith enough, yet?”

To help them keep the faith, as we heard in our reading, the author of Hebrews pointed to the Old Testament giants of the faith, Abraham and Sarah and others. It wasn’t easy for them either, the author wrote. Out of faith, Abraham and Sarah and the nation they birthed stayed on the move.

Listen to how Hebrews tells it:

“They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on earth If they had been thinking of the land they left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country that is a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God.”

They kept their faith in each other, most of the time, but most of all Abraham and Sarah, and Isaac and Jacob after them, kept their faith in God. And God returned the favor.

“Are we there yet?”

“Are we there yet?”

Some of us may think we know a little about what Abraham and Sarah must have felt. These have been raw and wearying weeks in our national life together this summer. And whether it is politics, or race or class or any of the realities that underlie our divisions, we have witnessed profound tragedy and the profound pain that comes with it. Pain that we all feel in our own ways.

We’re on the way to something. We can see and feel that. We are like those who can only pitch tents because we know we can’t stay here, in this moment of such national dis-ease and division. At least we surely don’t want to stay here.

As with Abraham and Sarah, we are drained and disoriented. As with Abraham and Sarah, we may look around and say we feel like “strangers and foreigners on the earth.”

We need a word. We need a reminder that God never leaves us where we are. We need something to help us hold on to hope as we journey on. We need to know that the country we desire is in the end a heavenly one, as Hebrews says. Yes. But we need a word and a vision that helps us believe that our world down here can better resemble, at least in some ways, the heavenly city. We need a promise that the Kingdom of God has indeed been ushered in through Christ and is worth continuing to pursue and build and expand.

When we ask, “Are we there yet?” we are asking, essentially, is this all there is? OR has God promised more? Has God in Christ called and equipped us to work for more?

That is where faith must come in, isn't it?

Surely we can rejoice that we do not have to stay here, in this broken place, whether that is in the life of our nation, our state, our city. Or maybe we are in a broken place in our lives, in our relationships, in our spirit, mind and body. We don't have to stay here. But how do we keep putting one foot in front of the other? How can we have faith in, well, faith? How can we have faith in God, when so much of God and life with God is, as Hebrews says, unseen?

God gave us brains, after all. God gave us logic and free will. Where does knowledge come into the picture? Maybe like the first-century Christians who were about to give up on Christ's return, we are ready to rely purely on our wits, on what we CAN see, on our street smarts ... because those things that are “hoped for,” as Hebrews says, are playing hide and seek. And they sure seem to be winning.

But that's the thing. Faith *is* a kind of knowledge. Faith is a way of knowing. Faith is a way of knowing that constantly seeks understanding.¹ Faith is a way of knowing that we will never know it all, see it all, grasp it all. Faith is a comfort that, as the Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, “For now we see as if through a dark glass. But one day we will see face to face.”

That is one way to think about faith. Last week I asked in my blog how you would finish the sentence “Faith is ...” in six words or fewer. You had great answers.

Faith is the core of my life, my being.

Faith is a relentless trust without limitations

Faith is knowing, with God, all is all-right.

Faith is the confident assurance of God's presence.

Faith is the ground between flights.

Faith is the catalyst for love

¹ Commentary by John C. Shelley, p. 330, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 3

Faith is: sometimes all we have, but always what we need.

Two of you agreed with the idea we find in Hebrews today that faith is not so much about the destination:

Faith is an unsurpassable personalized journey seeking God, one said.

Faith is my quest for God, offered another.

And two of you quoted other writers:

Frederick Buechner, wrote "faith is like whistling in the dark. It helps to give us courage to hold the shadows at bay."

And Anne Lamott's definition, that we know what faith is by its opposite which "is not doubt, but certainty."

It's true that, as with anything, our faith can waiver. At times it may feel like it's running out. We shouldn't be afraid to admit that. Even Christ on the cross cried out, "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

It's also true that we can tire of building God's kingdom on earth. I certainly have my days when I am ready to just sit down out of sheer fatigue and cry out, "Come now, Lord Jesus. I got nothing else."

That homeland that the author of Hebrews describes may seem some days as if it is only a shimmering mirage. Maybe our eyes are just playing tricks on us.

A couple of weeks ago, I concluded my sermon series on the Ten Commandments and how they provide a portrait of the covenant community God intends for us to build. Through our practice of the Decalogue, our faith builds bridges of support and interdependence that can span any troubled waters.

In that sermon, I reported on the latest research into poverty in Charlotte. Poverty's grip is tightening around the necks of our poorest neighbors with a fierce choke hold. Especially of our non-white neighbors. It was an almost suffocating report and I could feel the air leave the room as I reported the facts to you. I choose to believe, however, it was not the Holy Spirit that I felt leaving the room.

Yes, building the kind of kingdom God desires on earth, as it is in heaven, is exhausting, at times. That is why God gives us faith that keeps us moving, faith that keeps us focused.

So believe, sisters and brothers, trust and see:

Trust and see this: that the World Bank recently reported a huge drop in the number of global citizens living in extreme poverty, which is defined as living on less than \$1.90 a day. For the

first time in history – in history – less than 10% of the world’s population subsists on only that much. That compares to 37% in 1990 and 44% in 1984.

Are we there yet? No, but I choose to believe that we are getting there.

In a world that seems destined for some new world war, trust and see and remember stories such as the one that occurred just a few months ago in Somalia. Ten heavily armed gunmen stormed a bus that day and shouted that the Muslim passengers should separate themselves from the Christians.

But the Muslims refused. Some even gave the Christians clothing garments so they would not be so easily picked out.

“We asked them to kill all of us or leave us alone,” said one of the Muslim passengers, who later died from his gunshot wounds from protecting the Christians.

“We are our brother’s keeper,” the President of Kenya said, in awarding him the Order of the Grand Warrior, one of the nation’s highest honors.

Are we there yet? No, but I believe we are getting there. I believe the city whose architect is God is closer and closer.

In exalting Abraham, Isaac and Jacob for their faith, the author of Hebrews speaks of a promise. And perhaps that promise is each other; that we might have faith in each other especially on those days when we feel like nothing but strangers and foreigners on the earth.

Like one particular family, a single mother and two young kids, who more than once broken down on a two-lane road in Alabama, only to be found by a good old boy who knew a “feller” who would open up his garage, even though it is was past closing hour.

(Move to Communion Table)

Are we there yet? No, but I believe we are on our way, and with us walk all the saints who have kept the faith, “as many,” Hebrews says, “as the stars of heaven and as innumerable as the grains of sand on the seashore.”

And if none of that is good enough, friends, you can put your faith here in this table. For here is a way of knowing that we do not find anywhere else. Here the things of our faith that can’t otherwise be seen come into full view. Here in these symbols of the body and blood of Christ, our hope is never, ever disappointed. Here, we all are all inheritors of the promise.

Thanks be to God. Amen.