

After he had been here a few weeks Josh Erickson told me that he was really pretty scared about coming here for the summer. For someone going to school in downtown Detroit that's quite an admission but he had never been to this area, he didn't know me, he didn't know anyone here. I told him that's normal; I felt exactly the same way a few years ago myself. Some of our older parishioners are downsizing and moving to more convenient living, after calling a place home for so long that has to be scary too. I think we can empathize with Abraham and Sarah in the readings. They left their homeland, the only place that felt familiar and safe, and ventured out into the wild uncharted unknown, toward a promised land that must have seemed...well...less than promising. They risked that all because they heard a voice whispering in their spirit to go. There was no map, no timeline or itinerary, no geographical clues to identify the Promised Land, if and when they got there—only the sense that God wanted them to go. And amazingly, that is exactly what they did. They packed up all they owned, kissed the family and friends goodbye, and headed out in obedience to the voice they believed was God.

Later, God promised Abraham and Sarah that they would bear many descendants, with a family so large that it would be like counting the sands in the sea or the stars in the sky. That is a bold promise to anyone, but it was especially bold to believe in that promise when both of them were already quite old, and so far had not a single offspring to show for it! Did they misunderstand the promise in the first place?

How many times must they have twirled that possibility around in their heads and hearts across those barren years!

And if you know the story, as told in the book of Genesis, Abraham and Sarah did question their understanding of those dusty promises, especially as time went on. They tried taking matters into their own hands, with Abraham fathering a child through Sarah's servant girl, thinking that God might be waiting on them to take the. As you may remember, that experiment did not turn out well.

But in the end, God did fulfill His promises to Abraham and Sarah—not as soon as they would have liked, or in quite the ways they imagined. And in fact, the fulfillment of those promises would not even be completed during the lifetimes of Abraham and Sarah. Apparently God is not bound to complete His timetable according to our calendars, our convenience, or even the limits of our lifetimes. As one African American preacher said, **“God’s promises are powerful sure, but they can also be powerful slow.”**

The writer of Hebrews called this courageous, patient, stubborn belief in God, as embodied by Abraham and Sarah, **“faith.”** And this Old Testament couple are the first in a roll call of faith through the ages, men and women who dared to trust God to the very last breath, even when there was little evidence to confirm that their trust was well placed. **“Faith,” the writer said, “is being sure of what we hope for, and certain of what we do not see.”**

Faith sure is easier to talk about, than to practice, isn't it? Let's face it; we all prefer to place our trust in things,

in people, and in promises that can be verified, measured, proven. We want collateral for loans, contingency plans for the unexpected, and maybe reference letters or a goggle search to reinforce our confidence in people we meet. We avoid getting ourselves into vulnerable relationships, we plan out our trips, we insure our valuables—all perfectly sensible things, in themselves, but they are clear signs of our very human reluctance to leave ourselves without a backup, if things do not work out.

And that is the tough part of being a person of faith - faith does not always have the luxury of such fallback plans. Sometimes in life we simply must be willing to risk everything on that which is beyond our control or sight. It is much like the married couple who must learn to trust each other, to have faith in each other, even and especially when they are apart. They cannot become obsessed with having to have proof that their partner is being faithful to their promises; that very obsession, and the implied distrust and suspicion, is as likely to kill the love as surely as the infidelity it feared.

And likewise when it comes to faith in God, there is often no confirming word from the heavens, and no irrefutable evidence on earth that the faith is well placed. Sometimes the person of faith must simply keep walking, keep plodding forward, keep looking ahead, even though the horizon does not look promising. If we always had proof, if there was no risk, if there was no courage and maturity required for those who place their ultimate faith in God, then it would not be faith at all.

The writer of Hebrews described faith as the willingness to ***keep looking forward***.

Abraham and Sarah did not get bogged down **looking around** comparing their lives to others. They did not get lost in nostalgia, **looking backward** over their shoulder at those “good old days” gone by, as if the path to happiness and fulfillment was behind them—**they looked ahead**. They did not get to see the fulfillment of all that they hoped, not during their lifetimes. But even at the end, as they drew their final breaths, they were still looking forward, believing that the best was still coming, that God’s goodness was just getting started. And that, the writer of Hebrews said, is what faith is all about.

So how are we doing with this insight into faith? Are we willing to place all of our trust in God, trust that he still holds us securely when our own grip on life finally falls limp? Are we willing to keep believing in God even when evil seems to win, when suffering is unrelenting, when promises seem to go unfulfilled, when the heavens seem silent in response to our prayers.

I remember years ago after a retreat I did for the Air Force -- a young airman rather proudly announced that he had turn 75% of his life over to God -- which in all honesty I suspect was quite an improvement. When asked about the other 25%, he squirmed a bit and said that that was the really important stuff and he'd better take care of it himself.

God doesn't want us to make it through on our own, or even to handle the top 25% ourselves. He wants to help and guide and support us. He wants to love us and empower us. He wants us to have faith in him that he knows what he’s doing, wants what’s best for us and will keep his promises.

The great people of faith -- Abraham, Sarah, the prophets, the apostles, the saints -- are usually honored in memory, but in their own day their actions seemed foolish to those around them. Often the world around them, even family and friends, simply could see or understand why they placed their hope in something without an immediate payoff. The truth is that a lot of the things truly worth doing may not bear fruit in one lifetime. We may never see the impact we have on those who follow us. A people of faith must not be distracted by looking around or looking back; faith always requires us to be looking forward with courage and with hope.