“A Good Man is Hard To Find”

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Genesis 12:1-4

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

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In seminary, we had a joke that the answer to every test and quiz question, the answer to every essay prompt, even the answer to every Greek or Hebrew exam was just one little word — context. It wasn’t Jesus…like you’d expect. The answer was always context. Today’s text from the letter to the Hebrews is no different.

That’s what our New Testament passage is — a letter. And it’s important for use to think through the implications of reading a letter and not a narrative or poetry or any of the other genres we find in Scripture.

Last week, I sat down with our youth to begin looking at the lectionary passages for youth Sunday which will be in a few weeks. As we began looking at the letter from Paul to Philemon, when I pointed out that we were reading a letter that someone had written to someone else, our youth began to feel a little indignant for poor Paul and Philemon. Who were we to read someone else’s mail? Surely that was illegal back then, too!

Once we got over the legality of mail tampering, we realized that it’s a helpful reminder when we read something from the second half of the New Testament. When we read the letters from Paul to different worshipping communities, it’s helpful to remember that Paul is writing to a specific people at a specific place for a specific reason. Context.

So, what’s the context behind this text from Hebrews?

This letter was written, possibly by Paul, to a group of Jewish Christians who were experiencing persecution by those outside of the faith *and* who were despairing that Christ had not returned immediately after his resurrection. There were many early Christians who felt that Christ’s return was imminent and so when that didn’t happen, their faith began to flounder and despair.

We see this in the letter to the Hebrews — a letter which tried to “combat such melancholy and to encourage”[[1]](#footnote-2) the early church. The writer attempts to soothe their souls by reminding them of the many who have gone before them. While today’s text only reminds us of Abraham and Sarah, if we continued reading, we’d see Abel, Enoch, Noah, Moses, Samson, David, Samuel and the prophets and quite a few others, all getting shout-outs as exemplars of faithful living.

Today’s portion of Hebrews 11 focuses in on Abraham, one of the great patriarchs of our faith. The text lists what all Abraham did, but each major action on Abraham’s part begins with the phrase, “by faith.”

By faith Abraham obeyed and set out for a place where God was leading him.

By faith Abraham stayed in the Promised Land and raised a family.

By faith, Abraham and Sarah were able to conceive even in their old age and began a family.

By faith. By faith. By faith.

These stories are so well known to us, and also would have been so well known to the original audience of the letter to the Hebrews, that we could probably all list many of the deeds of Abraham and Sarah and Moses and David.

But have we forgotten what makes their actions *faithful*?

There’s a tradition in the Jewish faith called the midrash. In this tradition, rabbis and other scholars make up stories about stories in the Bible in an attempt to further explore a well-known Bible story. Often times, these midrash stories seek to answer a questions without ever telling the reader what the question was. This tradition goes back thousands of years — ever since the first stories of the Bible were told orally. Rabbi Marc Gellman is contemporary midrash writer who has written a book entitled, “Does God Have a Big Toe?: Stories About Stories In the Bible.”

The “Call of Abram” is just 4 verses long in Genesis, which we heard a few moments ago, but Rabbi Gellman takes these familiar 4 verses and expands them into his own story about a story in the Bible.

He writes:

Most people do not realize it, but God put in calls to other people before finally putting in a call to Abram.

First God called Eber and said, "Eber, leave your country and your neighbors and your family and go to a land I will show you, and I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great and you will be a blessing; all who bless you will be blessed and all who curse you will be cursed and through you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.”

And Eber said, "Who are you?" And God said, "God." And Eber said, "The god of what?" And God said, "The God of everything."  And Eber said, "Don't be ridiculous, there is no god of everything.  There is a god of the sun and a god of the moon, a god of the night and a god of the day, a god of the mountains and a god of the valleys, a god of the forests and a god of the deserts.  If you ask me, you are a little late.  Everything already has a god, and there is no god of everything. Maybe if you look hard, you can find something that doesn't already have a god.  As a matter of fact, I think there is no god of frogs at the moment.  Why don't you go check that out and then we can talk, because there just is no god of everything."

But Eber and God never talked again.

The next person God called was Peleg. God said, "Peleg, leave your country and your neighbors and your family and go to a land I will show you, and I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great and you will be a blessing; all who bless you will be blessed and all who curse you will be cursed and through you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed."

And Peleg said, "Who are you?" And God said, "God."  And Peleg said, "Where are you?" And God said, "I am everywhere." And Peleg said, "If you are everywhere, where do they put your statue so that people can bow down to you?" And God said, "I am invisible and no one may make a statue of me."  Peleg rolled on the ground with laughter. "Now let me get this straight! You are the invisible god of everything with no statue, and you want me to leave my home and follow you to a place you will show me?  Do you think I'm crazy? Now look, why don't you go to a good idol maker and have a nice statue made of your image, and then we can find a nice place to put it down where people can bow to it, and then we can talk."

But God and Peleg never talked again.

Then God went to Serug and said, "Serug, leave your country and your neighbors and your family and go to a land I will show to you, and I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great and you will be a blessing; all who bless you will be blessed and all who curse you will be cursed and through you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed."

And Serug said, "Who are you?" And God said, "God." And Serug said, "What will you give *me?"* And God said, "I just told you." And Serug said, "You don't understand.  I am not interested in moving anywhere or doing anything just so that my great-great-great-grandchildren will be a great nation.  I want to know what is in this deal for me right now.  Maybe if you showered me with some of those blessings up front I might be convinced.  How about giving me all the money in the world and the kingship of all the lands? What do you say?

But God said nothing.  Then Serug said, "All right, let's be reasonable.  I will go wherever you want for *most* of the money in the world and the kingship of the five largest countries.  How about that?" But God said nothing.

That was the last Serug ever heard from God.

By that time, God was not sure about finding the right man.  But God went to Abram and said, "Abram leave your country and your neighbors and your family and go to a land I will show you, and I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great and you will be a blessing; all who bless you will blessed and all who curse you will be cursed and through you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed."

And Abram said, "I will go, but there is just one thing I want."  God asked what that one thing was, and Abram answered, "I want to take my family with me."

God asked him, "That's it? You just want your family to come with you? DOn't you want to see me? And Abram said, "No." And God asked, "Don't you want to bow down to a statue of me?" And Abram said, "No." And God said, "Abram, don't you want anything for yourself?" And Abram said, "No."

Right then God decided not to ask anymore questions, and God let Abram gather his family and pack their things for the journey to the place that God would show to them.

Right then God knew that the right man was going to the right place at the right time for the right reasons.  God also knew that such things hardly ever happen.[[2]](#footnote-3)

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This midrash from Rabbi Gellman shows just what kind of faith Abraham must have had to listen to God. To find a person with the kind of faith God was demanding would have been difficult, but God found that faith in Abraham.

In a culture where polytheism ruled, Abraham decided to place all of his trust in the one God of everything. In a culture where idols ruled, Abraham decided to place all of his trust in the one invisible God. And in a culture in which *things* and the accumulation of things ruled, Abraham put all of his trust in a God who never promised him *things*, only family.

*This* is the kind of faith that Abraham had…and it’s the kind of faith that the writer of letter to the Hebrews is trying to urge us towards. The writer points out that Abraham had such a strong faith and he didn’t even get to see all of God’s promises play out. Abraham never lived long enough to see his descendants become innumerable, but he never gave up faith that God would make good on the promises. The author of the letter points out that many of our ancestors in faith never got to see the fulfillment of God’s promises, but their faith remained strong nonetheless.

The writer of Hebrews is encouraging us to place our own faith stories alongside Abraham and Sarah’s. The writer is encouraging us to remember that we come from a long line of faithful folk.

As one commentary writer points out that, “the recitation of persons and events from the past suggests that faith is not adequately defined by a single individual or community. It must be seen in terms of a larger story that reaches back at least to Abraham, who trusted the promises of God and left his home in Ur without knowing exactly where he was going.”[[3]](#footnote-4)

The author knows that the people reading this letter — then and now — need the reminder of Abraham and Sarah, of Moses, of David, of Samuel, of the prophets, to be reminded that while things may be difficult, we are not alone in this faith journey. We are a part of this larger story of faith — part of a story filled with people who said, “yes” to God’s call.

The question is, do we have the faith to say, “yes” to God’s call?

In a culture in which believing in something bigger than ourselves is ridiculed, are we willing to step out in faith to follow a God who calls us to labor alongside each other? In a culture in which the powerful are lauded and the weak are exploited, are we willing to step out in faith and follow a God who calls us to live in the upside down world of the kingdom? And in a culture in which — like Abraham’s culture and like the culture of the Roman Empire — *things* and the accumulation of them still rule, are we willing to set aside our *stuff* and follow God?

Saying “yes” to God’s call can be difficult and even dangerous. By saying, “yes,” we say “no” to a lot of other things. It can make our world feel dark and scary. It can often mean feeling like we are alone in the journey.

But the author of the letter to the Hebrews doesn’t leave us hanging. In addition to the “faith hall of fame” that we read about today, we have the reminder in chapter 12 that we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses. I love this imagery — of a cloud of witnesses surrounding me wherever I go. In this image we are reminded that we do not go this journey alone.

We have the examples of Abraham and Moses and all the other faithful leaders of the Bible as well as those who have been faithful in our own lives — our grandparents, our Sunday school teachers, the ministers who raised us — we are surrounded by this faithful bunch who have gone before us, showing us how to live and walk in faith, whose examples we still remember and recall. And who knows, for other people in this congregation or in your lives or still yet to come, you might be a part of their great cloud of witnesses, a person for whom your “yes” to God and “no” to the world is a part of their own faith hall of fame.

With these witnesses of God’s promises behind us and God’s promises for us before us, we can go confidently on this journey, knowing that we do not go this journey alone.

So, do we have the faith to say yes? I pray that we do.

All praise be to God.

Amen.

1. David Gray; Feasting. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Marc Gellman. “Does God Have a Big Toe?: Stories About Stories in the Bible” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Feasting [↑](#footnote-ref-4)