

SERMON TITLE: "Faith of Our Fathers"
SERMON TEXT: Hebrews 11:8-22
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: June 18, 2023 (Father's Day) at First United Methodist Church

INTRODUCTION

Last Sunday, as we reviewed Vacation Bible School, we talked a lot about the son and brother Joseph. Today, we're going back in time to talk about Joseph's great grandfather Abraham.

Do any of you remember your great grandfathers? I only had one great grandfather who lived long enough for me to know him. During the years I was in elementary school, Great Grandpa lived in Oregon, and we lived in Montana, so we didn't see him very often. But one thing I remember was that he could say the alphabet backwards and quite fast. That really impressed my two brothers and me. We were even more impressed when he counted backwards from 100.

One time when Great Grandpa came to visit my family at our house, he went on a long walk with us kids. Maybe he needed to get out and stretch his legs, or maybe we children were causing too much disruption of the adult conversation, and he sensed the need to get us out of the house. Whatever the motivation, that walk and talk became etched in my young memory. I can remember Great Grandpa suggesting to us kids that we pick up our feet rather than shuffling along, so that our shoes wouldn't get worn out so fast. I also remember that we stopped along the way as we found, picked, and ate some wild strawberries. It was a special time together.

When I was several years older, my family traveled to Salem, Oregon, to visit Great Grandpa and Grandma. We ate dinner with them at their house. They had become Seventh Day Adventists, and they didn't eat pork. Part of our meal-time conversation included that aspect of their Christian faith and practice.

Since today is Father's Day, I want to talk about the faith of our fathers. Hebrews chapter 11 is full of the names and examples of many fathers of faith. But, since Abraham is considered to be the

father of three world religions--Judaism, Islam, and Christianity—he gets the bulk of the attention. In a sense, he's the exemplar and leader of all other fathers. So, let's consider what Hebrews tells us and see what we can learn from this faith of our fathers.

1—FAITH OF OUR FATHERS SETS OUT FOR THE UNKNOWN

What we see immediately in Hebrews 11, verse eight, is that the faith of our fathers sets out for the unknown. The book of Genesis in the Old Testament tells us that, yes, Abraham had received a call from God to leave his father's land and go to a place that God was promising him as an inheritance. But that place was somewhere Abraham had never been before. In those days, it was highly unlikely that Abraham had any kind of map. Maybe someone had traveled there and had told Abraham about that distant land, but that's probably all the knowledge he had. And who knew if that kind of information was even trustworthy? And yet, Abraham was willing to obey God's call to pack up his wife, his servants, his livestock, and his possessions and take the gigantic risk to move to a distant place where everything was unknown.

I'm so grateful today that we have Google Maps. It makes finding everything so much easier. In the old days, we had to have a paper map in our car, or we had to talk to someone who could give us directions. But they didn't always tell us well. Maybe they said things like, "When you get to the Wilson farm, turn right. Then when you see the big elm tree, turn left." Or maybe they said, "The meeting will be in the old Post Office building," which—of course—you only understand if you've lived here long enough to know which building used to be the Post Office. GPS guidance isn't always accurate even today and, occasionally, a visitor to our church will tell me that their online instructions sent them downtown to the old church address at 26th and Jefferson. But, generally, today it's pretty easy to know where we're going geographically.

What's harder is to know where we're going in life. What decisions are the best for our career? What choices are best for our family? Who should we take along on our journey? How far should we

diverge from the old ways of home? What aspects of our life should we leave behind, so that we can be free to embrace the new situations and opportunities that we will encounter?

Abraham's story of faith tells us that, sometimes, at least, God is calling us to go beyond our comfort levels, beyond our sense of security, and beyond what we already know. I have no doubt that Abraham was a smart man. To do all that he did, he must have been intelligent and capable. Yet, he was willing to let go of his confidence in what he already knew and move into a new territory with many scary unknowns.

This is an important aspect of the faith of our fathers. When I was growing up, my dad wasn't a practicing Christian. He didn't profess any faith in God or Jesus. But he did have some important values and skills that enabled him to have a can-do attitude. Dad bought a small house and then proceeded to totally remodel and expand it while our family was living in it. There was a lot Dad didn't know about carpentry, plumbing, and electrical. But he was willing to face the unknown and learn. Sometimes Dad learned the hard way by trial and error. Sometimes he learned by asking and observing other people. Certainly, he learned through hard work.

I'm not saying that everything Dad did on that house project was perfect. Nor was he. When things went wrong, I can remember hearing some frustrated and colorful language. There was a lot of stress for him and for my mom and us kids during those years of house reconstruction. But, like Father Abraham, Dad was able to provide a life and home for our family because he was inspired by some kind of faith to step forward into the unknown.

Sometimes we get the idea that patriarchy requires us to be very conservative and traditional. We think that a society led by fathers requires us to suppress women and children, to deny rights to those who are different in race, national origin, gender, or sexual orientation. But that's not what the Bible teaches us. Fathers like Abraham had a faith that was constantly drawing them to new places and new understandings. Even when Abraham arrived in the promised land, he and his people didn't live in

permanent structures. They lived in tents that could be moved and adjusted. They could adapt as needed, as they learned more about this new place and different time. Clearly, the faith of our fathers sets out for the unknown.

2—FAITH OF OUR FATHERS SEEKS SOMETHING BETTER

Of course, the motivation to step forward into the scary unknown is the desire for something better. Abraham was willing to seek something better than the life he had had or would have had back in his homeland. We don't know what the problems were there. The Bible doesn't tell us if Abraham was in conflict with his father, or if the problem was a food shortage brought on by drought or pestilence, or why Abraham's opportunity there was limited. What we're told is that Abraham heard God's call, and he obeyed. He set forth as an immigrant. And that act of faithful migration led to hearing and seeing a vision of God's promise. God was going to give him and Sarah a son in their old age, and from that son would come so many descendants that they would number more than the stars in the sky and more than the grains of sand on the seashore. Such a large family would require a more abundant and better place to live.

The writer to the Hebrews spiritualizes this story and says that Abraham and the other fathers of faith were actually looking forward to a heavenly home. Maybe they were. I suspect, though, that they had more immediate interests too. Fathers are like that. They want to provide a decent and good life for their families here on earth. And the faith of Abraham indicates that this is appropriate.

What can be inappropriate sometimes is when fathers try to improve life for their children at the expense of other people's children. When some fathers use their privileges of white skin color, European heritage, inherited wealth, and Christian faith to ensure that their children get better and better opportunities while pushing down, limiting, and degrading children with brown and black skin, who speak languages other than English, whose people come from south of the border, or who have a

variation in gender or sexual orientation, then that's not the "better country" to which fathers should aspire.

There's a danger in our country right now. Many fathers are aligning themselves in faith and politics with a white supremacist, Christian nationalism that's very inflammatory. That's the Christian nationalist mindset that led up the January 6th attack on our government. This idea that one color, religion, and heritage is far superior to the others, and that the others should be suppressed and excluded is misguided, ugly, and evil.

The faith of our fathers that's healthy, good, and approved by God is a faith that looks toward that better country in which opportunity is available for everyone. It's a faith that celebrates diversity and lifts up the parents and children who are oppressed. It's a faith that remembers that all of us come from immigrant peoples and that everyone deserves a chance to succeed and have a better life.

CONCLUSION

Tomorrow is a state and federal holiday. So, there won't be any mail, and the banks will be closed. You might have missed this declaration because it just happened two years ago. Now, June 19th—or Juneteenth—is being celebrated to honor African Americans and their liberation from slavery. I have a brief video that I want to show you about this. As you watch the video, I hope you will consider that the faith of our fathers calls us to let go of some old ways and step into the unknown. The faith of our fathers calls us to seek something better for all our children.