

Stepping Out in Faith

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BASED ON HEBREWS 11:1-3; 8-16

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*Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.
(Hebrews 11:1)*

I have a confession to make. I like watching reality T.V. Whether the show focuses on beauty, romance, weight loss, dancing, or traveling around the world, I somehow find myself tuning in to these shows season after season. My affinity for reality T.V. began with “Survivor.” I am captivated by grown men and women who give up the conveniences of daily life to live with a bunch of strangers in a hot, humid climate that provides only life’s most basic resources. I always wonder what motivates the contestants on this show. Is it just the 1 in 16 chances they have at winning one million dollars?

It seems to me that any person who is considering trying out for the “Survivor” cast needs to possess some essential qualities. First, a cast member needs to be tough, both physically and mentally. Throughout the course of the show, the castaways face challenges—both physical and mental. The castaways need to be mentally tough because they are being sent to a land that is not their own. The castaways are leaving their friends and families. They have no means of communicating with their loved ones, except through the occasional letter or video from home that is offered as a reward. In addition, the castaways are challenged to build a new community with their teammates. They must work with their teammates to devise a shelter, to build a fire, to gather and sterilize water, and to gather and cook food. The game of Survivor involves more than winning challenges to make it to the end; it involves learning how to operate day-to-day so that one can make it to the live finale.

The audience in Hebrews reminds me of “Survivor” castaways. Though biblical scholars cannot say for certain, Hebrews was thought to be written somewhere around 65 A.D. There is no mention of the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem, but there certainly is an allusion to the persecution of early Christians at the oppressive hand of the Roman Emperor, Claudius. Hebrews is a sermon that is thought to have been written to Jewish Christians. These Christians have left their families. They have left behind their cultures—their beliefs and their practices to follow Christ. The audience of Hebrews has been cast away from all that they have known in order to follow Jesus. As the persecutions intensify, the

members of this community begin to question and to doubt the vows they made at their baptism. They begin to question whether or not this community that they built is strong enough to withstand the persecutions. The people of the community begin to doubt God and doubt themselves, and they long for the comfort and security of their homeland.

The author of Hebrews, a person thought to be a Pauline follower, exhorts this community to consider its faith. Were we to consider all the facets of faith, we would have enough material to cover this liturgical year and then some. So, the author of Hebrews examines two aspects of faith that he wants to encourage in this community of Christians. First, the author describes faith as the “assurance of the things hoped for.” Having this assurance is demonstrated through our faith both inwardly and outwardly. Inwardly, our faith is a response to the trustworthiness of God. When we have this inward assurance of things hoped for, we believe in God’s promises. When we are faced with personal crises, natural disasters, injustice, or oppression, we remain confident in God’s promises of peace, justice, mercy, and salvation.

Outwardly, our faith is a response to the confidence we have in God’s promises. When we pray boldly for our neighbor who is in crisis, when we serve our community, when we work to ease the burdens of others, we demonstrate the assurance of things not seen in a visible way. Faith is “the conviction of things not seen.” Through the eyes of faith, the universe around us filled with background noise, chatter, and a busy schedule is transformed into God’s creation. Moments that were once seen as inconveniences are now seen as moments to stop and appreciate of the hand of God at work in our lives.

Once the author of Hebrews explains his position on faith, the author then introduces his audience to the pioneer of all “Survivor” castaways—Abraham. The author of Hebrews asserts that Abraham’s faith was evident through the four qualities that he possessed. First, Abraham had a deep trust for the one who had sent him. Second, Abraham’s journey required that he experience feelings of dislocation. Third, Abraham utterly depended on God throughout the journey, and fourth, Abraham never doubted the final destination.

When Abraham was called out of the land of Ur, he was obedient (Genesis 12 [NRSV]). In fact, throughout his journey, Abraham was obedient to the point that he was willing to sacrifice his own son (Genesis 22:1-19). In order to fulfill his call, Abraham had to leave that which was familiar. His wife, his servants, and he lived in tents, waiting upon God to direct their lives. Abraham utterly depended on God. When Abraham was in despair because he had no heirs, he did not give up and return to his homeland (Genesis 15). Rather, Abraham cried

out to God, and he allowed God to comfort him. Throughout his journey, Abraham never doubted the final destination. Though Abraham would not live to see his descendants be as numerous as the stars in the heavens, he never doubted that God would fulfill his promises.

Neither Abraham, the Christians who first heard the sermon of Hebrews, nor any of us are applying to be castaways on Survivor. But, we are all heirs of God's promises. The qualities that Abraham demonstrated in his faith journey are the same qualities that the author of Hebrews exhorts his audience to possess. These are the same qualities that we are called to demonstrate and to possess as we leave this place this morning.

- ❖ We are called to trust in God who calls us.
- ❖ We are called to be a people assured of that which we hope for and confident of that which do not see.
- ❖ We are called to vulnerability.
- ❖ We are called to abandon ourselves to God, wholly, knowing that we will be called to something that will challenge us.
- ❖ We are called to depend utterly on God throughout our journey. It is easy to become frustrated when projects and ministries don't take off on the first, second, or fiftieth try. In every endeavor that we, as a community of faith, embark upon, we must fully rely on God to lead us.
- ❖ Finally, we are called to remember, that like Abraham, the prophets, and the early Christians, we are living in a temporary land. We are called to serve God faithfully as we look forward to that city, whose architect and builder is God.

As we prepare to celebrate The Great Thanksgiving, let us take the opportunity to remember the covenant God has made with us and to, in turn, renew our covenant with God to live and to serve as God's faithful followers. Amen.