

## “Into the Unknown”

MJCF

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Hebrews 11:8-16 (Genesis 24:12-14)

I always remember my aunt Agnes saying, “We are but visitors here on earth.” It reminds me of the passage that talks about Abraham and other people of faith being strangers and foreigners on earth. It’s a reminder that our lives are relatively short if we compare it with the fact that after our life is over, we’ll be spending eternity with God. It means we don’t have to be too overwhelmed when things aren’t going well – because our lives are only temporary compared with what happens after life here is over. It also means that when things are going well, we need to be careful to not become too attached to all the good things around us. Living as visitors, we’re like travellers in a foreign land. We can get connected with life, people and things around us, but that’s all only temporary. As travellers, we are still “on the way.” One day we will meet Jesus Christ. Our relationship with God through Jesus is greater than life itself, because it will continue.

Abraham understood life in this way. He didn’t know about Jesus, but he experienced God’s call to leave his homeland, start travelling and follow God’s leading into the unknown. Today, we read that Abraham, by faith, obeyed God’s call to leave his home, “...not knowing where he was going.” In his decision to follow God, he committed his life to travelling, trusting that God would fulfill the promise that he would receive land, and many descendants, even though he and his wife had never been able to have children and had reached an old age. God would still provide. Although God promised him many descendants like the stars in the sky, or the sand by the sea, Abraham eventually died in his faith without having completely received the promises. But, we read that from a distance he “saw and greeted them.” Isaac was miraculously born to Abraham and Sarah. God’s promises would then continue through Isaac. When Sarah died, Abraham bought land for her burial. This was the first step toward the blessing of land his descendants would one day receive as a gift from God. In a similar way, we too will not necessarily have everything worked out during our lives because we are part of a bigger picture that only God sees. If we’re walking in faith, with an eye seeking God’s ways, we’ll sense God’s presence and we’ll learn how God is working all around us to fulfill God’s promises.

Today, from the book of Hebrews, we read that Abraham and other people who walked in faith, “confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth.” They didn’t return to their homeland, but instead looked to God, desiring “a better country, that is, a heavenly one.” It got me thinking, do we see ourselves as travellers, or have we pretty much settled into our own familiar ways? The easiest thing is often to just keep things the way they are. Many people, maybe most people resist change. We need stability. We get nervous if life becomes too unpredictable. If we’re living life like a journey, it will mean we have less control. There will be more surprises. And, as travellers, we’ll need to learn to trust God much more. The changes we experiences will add tension, but as we learn to trust, they will also add richness to our lives. At times, we may feel lost, but as we look to God, who has promised never to leave us, our lives will turn into an adventure.

I often find it hard to step out of comfortable routines. It was really difficult to make the decision to follow God’s call to move back to Japan. I have sensed God’s call for a while, but the timing never felt right. Usually, I try to have everything figured out before taking a step of faith, but if I’ve planned for all the possible outcomes of a decision, is that decision really an act of faith? Abraham set out to follow God’s call, “not knowing where he was going.” If I were in Abraham’s shoes (or sandals), I would have wanted to know exactly where I was moving, where I’d stay along the way, what I’d do when I get to the new place, and then make sure I have

enough money to cover expenses. Especially since Abraham took his family with him, I imagine he would have prepared to take care of them along the way. In leaving on the journey, he was leaving the stability of his home area. Instead of relying on the security of his home environment, he would have to rely on God to provide and protect his family. In those days, people could starve, or die of thirst in the desert. Bandits could attack them. They could die of sickness, alone and without the resources available in a city. We read that Abraham “looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” He trusted that God would provide the resources that he would need. We could say that he had a “heavenly vision.”

What about us? Do we have a sense of the heavenly vision that God has prepared for us? Many have heard the expression that some people are “too heavenly minded to be of any earthly good.” And, this is a danger, especially for Christians. We can easily get so stuck thinking about heaven that we stop caring for anything happening around us. Some think that the end is coming and everything will just be burned up anyway. “We’re going to heaven, Hallelujah!” But, if we’re truly following God, we’ll look to God’s Son, Jesus as our example. He was always engaged with the people around him. He cared. He never told people to forget about their problems because they’d one day go to heaven anyway. Instead, he cared for everyone around him. He miraculously created more wine when it ran out at a wedding. He healed the sick. He ate with the outcasts, and showed care for those were poor. He spoke against the political systems that favored the rich while oppressing the poor.

After three years of ministry, Jesus knew he would soon be executed on a cross. He knew that God’s will was for him to continue speaking the truth about God. So, he didn’t try to avoid the way of sacrificial love, even though it would eventually lead to his death. According to Luke 9:51, “As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.” Because he threatened the comfortable systems of the day, the religious leaders feared losing their power over the people. Finally, they plotted, and had Jesus crucified. But then, God raised him to life as Lord over all.

No one is “good enough” for eternity in heaven. But, through the sacrifice of Jesus, we are all forgiven. God could have just said the word and saved a place for us in heaven for after we die, but instead God cared enough to take on the weakness of human flesh, coming as a human being, in the form of Jesus. God’s great love for us is shown through the faithfulness of Jesus. Jesus was the perfect example of someone who acted like a traveller on earth. He made positive connections with people on the way, but he was driven by his relationship with God, “the Father.” He was not too attached to the things of this world. Like Abraham, he set his vision by faith in God.

In Romans 12, the Apostle Paul says, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God...” And, in Colossians 3 he says, “Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.” We so easily get stuck with our thoughts on earthly things. If we remember that we are travellers, headed for the place where God is leading, the challenges of this world will be put into better perspective. And, we’ll not get caught up with trying too hard to hold onto the many blessings around us. Instead, we’ll be ready to share what we have, trusting that God provides for all our needs. Abraham lived his faith. He often prayed. He built altars and worshipped God. His ancestors worshipped many gods, but Abraham focused on the one true God. He trusted God enough to let his nephew choose the more fruitful land, when they had to separate. Abraham then lived in the desert, yet God blessed him and took care of him. There’s a story in Genesis 14

where, as an act of worship to God, Abraham gives 10 percent of everything to Melchizedek. Melchizedek was known as a priest of the Most High God. He and Abraham worshipped the same God. Through his actions, Abraham showed that he was not stuck in one place, trying to build up his own wealth in a difficult land. Instead, he travelled, following the call of God, and through him, God began blessing others around him.

If we see ourselves as travellers, we'll give attention to our journey. We easily get caught up in focusing on achieving our goals that we forget to see where God is working along the way. As Rie, Irene and I prepare to sell our townhouse, we have been very busy painting and reducing stuff. In order to reduce stuff, it has been a challenge to let go of some things that I've saved my whole life. I'm now throwing away artwork I did in kindergarten! I just sold my bike that I'd bought back in 1980. It feels strange to let go of these things, but I also am starting to feel freer to take steps of faith to where I feel God leading.

Are we too attached to something, something that is making it hard for us to move into the unknown? We may then need to ask for courage to let it go. Sin it could mean being attached to the wrong things. We become stuck if we can't let go. It's like worshipping idols instead of the one God. We need to keep looking to Jesus. We need to abide in him, while we hold onto other things more loosely.

The busyness with painting and reducing stuff sometimes feels overwhelming. In the middle of it all, I made a deal to sell one of our beds. The buyers asked if I could deliver it, since they only had a small car. I had been trying to sell the bed for a long time, so I agreed to drive the 25 minutes to deliver it. After returning home, I got a message from them that there were a few hardware connections missing. We had no idea where the parts could be, and the people who had bought the bed searched and the parts were nowhere to be found. After a thorough search, I decided I may need to buy the parts somewhere and again make the trip out to deliver them. I was frustrated! At the same time, I was preparing today's message. I thought, if I see myself on a journey, looking to God and trying to walk by faith, what is God telling me in this situation...? Maybe God has some plan in this disruption. I decided to keep connecting with the people who bought the bed, letting them know I hadn't forgot about them. I found out the measurements of the missing parts, bought them, and delivered them. I was quite overwhelmed at the appreciation expressed after I arrived. The people invited me in for coffee and asked me about my work and I shared I was a Christian pastor. They were not Christian, but they believed in one God. We talked about our work, family, and faith. As I drove home, I sensed that God had allowed this difficulty on my journey to bring us together!

Coming back to our perspective here at MJCF, in 2021, how are we travelling with God into the unknown? How do we deal with the disruptions as we walk our journey? We can look for God at work even in the challenges. I'm getting excited to see what God has in store for us as a church. Of course, I also have fears about how our small church will do when Rie and I are connecting from far away Japan, and I have fears about the challenges my family may face. But, I believe this is a chance to put greater trust in God's leading. We don't know what our individual lives will look like in the future. We don't know how our ministry as a church will look in the coming year. But, we do know that God is trustworthy. As we pray about the future, God will grant us a sense of the next steps to take. The church is not ours, but God's. We belong to God. From Japan, I hope to build connections between churches in Japan and churches here in Canada and the US. Especially for small groups like ours, it's important to know that we are members of a much larger faith community. I'm hoping that we can learn more and more how to share with each other, as we walk the journey of faith. Let's pray.

Loving God, thank-you for the story of Abraham. We see how you led him and blessed him as he put his faith in you, leaving the security of his home. May we also hold on loosely to those attachments that keep us from stepping out in faith. Grant us a clear vision of your will, that we may walk in your ways, that we may learn greater trust in you. O Lord, as a church we are coming to a time of transition. As my family moves to Japan, I pray that you will fill your church with your Spirit. Help us to trust in your leading. You have blessed us richly through many changes in the past. People have come and gone. And now, I pray that you would draw more people to your church. Grant us all a creative spirit, that we might understand your unique calling for us. And, may we share this vision, that more and more people may come to know you and be blessed by your love, through Christ our Lord, Amen.