

Stepping into the Unknown, with God Gerald Neufeld MJCF January 7, 2024

Hebrews 11:8-16

At the beginning of a new year, it's a good time to prepare a future vision for the coming year. Many make New Year's resolutions, such as the decision to lose weight. And then, most people then break the resolution within the first week! Throughout the year, I spend a lot of time thinking about what sort of plans to make for various projects. My problem is that I spend too much time thinking, and not enough time actually doing! This is where the story of Abraham challenges me. Abraham was a man who acted on his faith. He not only thought about what God wanted him to do, he trusted God enough to take steps of obedience. But, notice that Abraham didn't have a specific plan about what he would do, or even where he would go! In his response to God's call, we read that, "...he set out not knowing where he was going"! How is that for faith! It takes a lot of trust to follow God's leading when you can't even explain to others where you are going, or why! As we begin 2024, I believe our challenge is to set out, with our main goal to seek, and follow God's leading, wherever it may take us. This goal is far more important than making resolutions or setting up specific plans to achieve various things. Our plans develop later, coming out of our times of prayer. As we seek first the way God is leading us through Jesus Christ, it then becomes clearer where we need to put our energy in making various plans.

As I prepared this message, we were in the middle of finishing renovations to the Tokyo Anabaptist Center. Early on, Rie and I decided that we felt God leading us to not just rely on professionals to do some perfect and expensive renovations. We felt that it was also important to include our faith community in the work. In Canada, many people do their own renovations, and we've had experience painting our own house in the past. It's good to work together with others as much as possible. We're so thankful for all the people who helped, both in the Ohitsuji kai (adult volunteer group), and the Kohitsuji kai (young people volunteer group). It has been a lot of work, but we couldn't have done it so quickly without all the help. After stripping wallpaper, sanding, puttying, wiping walls, cleaning up putty dust, sealing walls, putting on primer, and painting several rooms, I think the results look pretty good, but please come see for yourself. Of course, if you look closely, it's not perfect, but it was well worth the time and effort. And I think everyone enjoyed learning together. Rie and I are so thankful for God's leading through this busy time. Along with other people on the Anabaptist Center committee, we took steps of faith to set out with this project a number of years back, not knowing how God would lead. Now, we are seeing God's answers to our prayers. Please remember to pray as we seek donations to help fund the renovations, and as we together develop the Center and build community. The Center belongs to TAFMC. The progress this far has been the result of many hours of hard work, and the faith and prayers of many different people.

I've always thought Abraham had some kind of superhuman faith, but as I prepared this message, I learned that he may have not been much different than any of us! If we read the story of Abraham and Sarah, we often start with Genesis chapter 12, where he was known as "Abram" and his wife, "Sarai." God calls him to leave his country and head to the land God would show him. God promises to make his descendants into a great nation, and he would be blessed, and be a blessing to others, including all the families of the earth. Abraham then takes his family and journeys to Canaan. I had always imagined that this was a huge step of faith – to leave his home, where everything was familiar, and head to an unknown land. On one level this was true. But, I found it interesting to read the verses in chapter 11, just before God's call to Abraham. There, it says that Abraham's father Terah, had already started the journey to Canaan. I'm reading from Genesis 11, verse 30, "Now Sarai was barren, she had no child.

Terah took his son Abraham and his grandson Lot son of Haran and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Abram's wife, and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan, but when they came to Haran, they settled there. The days of Terah were two hundred five years, and

Terah died in Haran.” In other words, God’s call to Abraham was for him to complete the journey to Canaan that his father had already started! Not only that, Abraham’s wife was barren, and his father had just died – not much of a hopeful future there.

Because of this, I can start to imagine how Abraham may have been open to following God’s call, and the promise of new blessings. God understands us better than we understand ourselves. God knows exactly what we need. Like Abraham, the challenge for us is to learn to trust that God does know what we need. God is able to lead us, if we ask. But, do we actually seek God’s leading? Or, do we instead seek what we think is best, and then pray that God will help us do it? It’s so easy to slip into that way of praying, rather than starting with God. If we forget God, and seek only our own happiness, we’ll eventually run out of power because we’re not seeking our energy from the true source. Even though Christians have access to God’s [unlimited strength], if we do not [seek] it, we will run out of power. Of course, the strength we receive from our Lord, is not just energy for our own enjoyment. Like God’s promise to Abraham, the blessings we receive from God are for the purpose of blessing others.

I confess that I often put a lot of energy into trying to keep an image of being a good person, even though I’m often more self-centred than caring for others. For all of us, the effects of sin in our lives shuts out the vision of God, in different ways. I usually try to keep everything under control in my life. I find security in my own routines, and don’t often step out into unpredictable situations. Yet, God calls us all to open up to God’s goodness, and God’s leading, even when we don’t understand everything about where God is calling us. Sin mixes up our priorities. The challenge is to find our security and stability in God’s Son, Jesus Christ, the one who stepped out of heaven to come to us as a baby at Christmas, the one who later died on the cross for our sins, the one who was raised to life as Lord of all. Jesus said, “Seek first the Kingdom of God...” and all our other needs will be taken care of. Are we ready to let go of some of the things that maybe get in the way of “setting out” to follow God’s leading to new things?

Abraham, as well as his son and grandson, Isaac, and Jacob lived in tents, which meant they often moved rather than settling in one place and starting to build a “city.” Verse 10 of Hebrews 11 says, “For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” Abraham’s priority was God. God was the one who shaped his future, and Abraham was determined to trust and follow, even if it meant believing in something naturally impossible. Sarah was 90 years old and they had never been able to have a child. But, trusting in God’s promise, they were able to have a child, even though they were too old.

The writer of Hebrews emphasises that Abraham, as well as a list of many other faithful people lived with hope in God. Although they saw hints that God was leading them, they didn’t see the final fulfillment of God’s promises. But, later generations did see it. God blessed Abraham and Sarah with Isaac, but they didn’t live to see their descendants become as numerous as the stars in heaven or the sand on the seashore. God promised to give them land, but the larger vision was more a spiritual one. As the writer of Hebrews says, they looked to receive a heavenly country. Abraham and Sarah had their minds set on God, and seeking God’s ways. They weren’t just stuck on what blessings they could receive on earth. In the coming year, may we too let go of those things that hold us back, and place our priority on seeking God’s leading wherever it may take us. Let’s pray.

Loving God, you created the universe, and yet we forget that you are in control. There are so many sad things happening in our world; wars, sickness, and suffering. We confess times that we’ve forgotten you and relied on just ourselves. Help us to trust in you, even when we don’t understand everything. Your love, as shown to us through Jesus, is amazing. We want to walk in the light of your love. Grant us the courage to “set out” going the way that you lead us. Help us to walk more and more with you in the coming year, that your blessings may flow through us to all those around us. In Christ we pray, Amen.