

Genesis 12:1-9  
Hebrews 11:1-16

26<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost  
Midway Presbyterian Church  
November 18, 2018

## **A Pilgrimage of Faith**

### *Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson*

In our Old Testament Lesson today we hear of God's call to a man to go on a pilgrimage. Specific directions are not given but the purpose is. Listen to these words from Genesis 12:1-9...

### *Introduction to the Epistle Lesson*

The writer of Hebrews saw people in danger of forsaking their Christian faith—not only from persecution by outsiders, but also from a weariness with the demands of the Christian life and a growing indifference to their calling. In our Epistle Lesson we hear that it was by faith that Abraham obeyed God's call and by faith other wondrous things came to be in the lives of the ancients. Listen to these words from Hebrews 11:1-16...

### *Sermon*

When we hear the word "pilgrim," we may think of those brave men, women, and children who journeyed across the Atlantic Ocean on the Mayflower to New England in 1620. The voyage was anything but a pleasure cruise. Bobbing like a cork on rough seas, it was seven long weeks before they finally arrived at Cape Cod on November 11, north of their destination of Northern Virginia.

Once there, they encountered winter storms. Icy winds and heavy snows proved too much for their hastily constructed cottages. There was a shortage of food and following a great epidemic, half the original company of 101 people had died.

Like Abraham in our Hebrew 11 lesson, the Pilgrims knew that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. But through their faith in God, they found the courage to keep on. And we proudly call ourselves their descendants, if not in fact, at least in faith.

The word “pilgrim” originated during the Middle Ages. In the beginning it was not so much a title, as a description of people. The word simply meant a “stranger on a journey.” One frequently saw strangers traveling to a shrine or holy place as an act of worship. They were not drifters. They were not tramps. They were not tourists. They were people with a purpose and a destination in a strange land, and they were called “pilgrims.”

In James Michener’s *Iberia*, he recounts how the medieval pilgrims who traveled the long road from France to the Cathedral of Saint James in Spain would, as they neared the end of their trying journey, strain their eyes toward the horizon, hoping to see the towers of the long-sought cathedral in the distance. And the first one to see it would shout, “My Joy!” (p. 892)

Well, the image of the pilgrim continues to be suggestive for the church today. And the scriptures inform that image. For they help us to understand the calling, the purpose, and the destination of the people of God. So what does it mean for us to be on a pilgrimage of faith?

First, it means that we are grounded in scripture, mindful of the past, living in the present, and oriented toward the future. The writer of Hebrews tells us that Abraham, the patriarchs, and all the covenant people of God were a forward-looking people.

All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth. (11:13)

Their orientation toward life was the future, not the past. They had been willing to leave home and endure hardships because they saw a future full of promise. Pilgrim people are not bound by

the past, nor solely oriented to the present, because they are people who look for a world to come.

In Luke 9 we find these words of Jesus:

“No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.” (v. 62)

And in his letter to the Church in Philippi Paul says:

Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. (3:13-14)

As the Roman stoic philosopher Seneca put it:

Don't stumble over something behind you.

Constantly looking back to “the good old days” can be a problem when things in the present or hopes for the future aren't so bright. It implies that the great things of God are in the past, and in comparison the present and future seem empty and hopeless.

Sometimes the tendency of a congregation is to long for “the good old days.” Back then the church was more pure and peaceful; issues and concerns were more easily dealt with; needs more easily met; membership and giving were growing; fellowship was warm and rich; and people had more commitment to the church. Many church members may feel as though the challenges of the present and the future have become too complex and difficult. “If only we could go back to yesterday.” But if our only view of the future of the church harkens back to a golden era of the past, then we do ourselves no favors in trying to envision and plan for the future.

By no means is it being suggested that we should not remember our past or have a grateful appreciation for it. The people of God can learn great things from their past and use those learnings as valuable resources for the present and the future.

Our Old Testament lesson from Genesis 12 reminds us of God's promise to bless this people and through them to bless all the nations of the earth. God promised Abraham that he would give this people a land flowing with milk and honey. But the fulfillment of that promise involved years of travel and waiting, barrenness, slavery in Egypt, wandering in the wilderness, times of unfaithfulness, and complaints against Moses.

And it's helpful to know that times were not easy for the readers of our New Testament letter to the Hebrews. Some had experienced fierce persecution. They had been assaulted, their homes had been plundered, and some had even been thrown into prison. To such people this letter came as an encouragement. The writer turns their eyes to Christ, shows how Christ fulfills the hope expressed in the Old Testament sacrifices, and calls his readers to a steadfast faith that will take them through the difficult times they now face.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb. 12:1-2)

No, we do not honor our fathers and mothers of the faith by locking ourselves into the past, by trying to do things just as they were done yesterday. Sing only the same hymns that we sang yesterday. Have only the same organization and meeting times that we had yesterday. Give only the same offering that we gave yesterday. Yes, we can learn from the past, we can thank God for the joys of the past. But the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is not simply God of the past; he is also God of the present and the future. If we are to be a pilgrim people on a

journey of faith, we need to be a people grounded in the past, but living in the present and looking to the future, giving of ourselves to the tasks set before us today. A pilgrim people who look to Jesus as the Pioneer and Perfecter of our faith. Jesus, who traveled as a stranger and a pilgrim through a wilderness of suffering, never wavering, but fashioning his life into a prayer—putting his trust in the One who had sent him.

Secondly, for us to journey on a pilgrimage of faith means that we seek a better world. Abraham longed for “a better country, that is, a heavenly one” (v. 16). What Abraham longed for was heaven on earth, a promised land, a city of God, a hope which would one day be realized on earth.

The New Testament hope is just as concrete. Jesus taught his disciples to pray that God’s will would be done on earth as it is in heaven, that his kingdom would come. In the Revelation, John of Patmos envisioned a new heaven and a new earth. The promise of the world to come includes the promise of a better world here on earth. One of the things that binds us Presbyterians together is a desire for the world to be a better place in which to live—a world that is reconciled to God’s love, truth, and peace; a world that is free from political, social, and religious divisiveness, and a world that accepts all kinds of people. A world where people do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. To be a pilgrim people is to seek for a better world, the world God wants this one to be.

For example, the children at Thornwell Home who come from broken homes, who come out of neglect or abuse, they need our help. Hungry people need our help. Lost people in this community and throughout the world need the good news of a new life in Jesus Christ. We have this treasure of the gospel in earthen vessels, not to be hoarded, but to be shared.

Third and finally, a pilgrim people need to be a prayerful and patient people. Instant gratification is not on the menu this Thanksgiving. We look rather at the pilgrim's *progress*, the church's progress. As the people of God, we share life together and want others in our community to join us in a pilgrimage of faith. As our Mission Statement on the back of our bulletin declares:

Our purpose is to call people into a living and growing relationship with God in Jesus Christ with the help of the Holy Spirit, and to promote the mission of Christ in compassionate ministries. We intend to be a welcoming and caring church – a church family that nurtures a sense of community and belonging. We want young and old to join us in the Christian pilgrimage as sojourners in the great adventure of faith.

We share memories, stories, dreams, and hopes. Yes, we may sometimes become discouraged. We may not see those dreams and hopes fulfilled as soon as we want—even in our lifetime on earth. But we walk on, and do not forget that we are people who journey in faith, interested not only in ourselves, but also in others.

And the good news is that we do not walk alone. Through prayer and worship, God's Word and the Sacraments, fellowship and nurture, witness and service, God sustains and guides us in our journey. As we live out our life together, we are assured that God will be with us always, even to the end of the age. And that's something to be thankful for.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.