

SERMON: By Faith
TEXT: Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

8-7-22

One day a little boy was in his grandmother's kitchen, telling her about how everything seemed to be going wrong – at school, at home, and on top of those things, he had severe health problems. She listened carefully while she worked on baking a cake. When he stopped for a moment, she asked him if he would like a snack. Of course, he said yes.

"Here, have some cooking oil," she said.

"Yuck!" said the boy.

"How about a couple raw eggs?"

"Gross, Grandma!"

"Well, I've got some flour here, or baking soda."

"Grandma, all those things are yucky! I don't want anything like that!"

"Well, yes, by themselves those things don't make very good snacks, I guess. But when I put them all together and bake them

in the oven, I'll have a wonderful, delicious cake that will make your mouth water!"

Grandma then explained, "Sometimes the things we face in life are 'yucky' at best. Bad things happen to us; we have problems and tragedies that no one would choose to have because there's nothing good about them. But after we've gotten past them and we look back at them, we realize that God brought them all together to create a wonderful life."

The saying is trite, but true: If life gives you lemons, make lemonade. We all know stories about people who have done astonishing things in the face of impossible odds.

I read a story awhile back about an Olympic swimmer by the name of Tom Dolan. Twice he has won Olympic gold medals, despite the fact that he has severe asthma and an unusually narrow windpipe. He has only one-tenth of the normal lung

capacity. Yet, he decided if he lived his life wondering what could go wrong, he'd never accomplish a thing. He won his first gold medal in the 1996 Olympics. And in 2000, as he was getting ready to go for the gold once again, he says he realized that his asthma actually gave him an edge over the other swimmers, because it made him that much more determined. "I wouldn't be half the competitor I was had I not had to battle asthma," he says. "We all have strengths and weaknesses. I have to live the life that God gave me."

Often I wonder how anyone **without faith** gets through anything. And I've heard the same sentiment from countless others who have endured terrible trials.

I love how the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews emphasizes this point. He cleverly summarizes the life of Abraham using the phrase "by faith" over and over again to show

that Abraham's life was lived and accomplishments were achieved "by faith." Let's listen to a bit of that passage again.

"By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. **By faith**, he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. *For he looked forward* to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. **By faith**, he received the power of procreation, even though he was too old – and Sarah herself was barren – because he considered him faithful who had promised."

Think about that. He didn't know the destination, but Abraham left home, as God instructed. Then, after he arrived in the land God had promised, Abraham had to live in a tent, as if he were a foreigner. He could not claim the land as his own just

yet. He had to wait. And, speaking of waiting, Abraham and Sarah had given up on any hope of ever having children, for they were so old, they were “as good as dead” so the writer describes them. But when God promised it would happen, Abraham found his hope renewed. Abraham had known God’s faithfulness in so many ways, he, too, could go forward BY FAITH.

Notice, too, that faith and hope are inextricably linked in this passage. “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Abraham didn’t even know where he was going when he left home, but he had hope in God’s promise that there was an inheritance waiting for him. And when he finally reached his inheritance, he lived in a tent like a foreigner, but he could do so because he “looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”

Of course, Abraham’s faith faltered at times. Like all of us, he certainly had his moments of doubt and impatience.

Remember that he fathered a child with Hagar, his wife's servant girl, in a time when he doubted that Sarah would ever be able to bear his offspring. And I refuse to believe that he never hesitated or had second thoughts when he was getting ready to sacrifice his son Isaac as God called him to do. He must have wondered why. He must have stopped to consider whether his faith in God was worth such sacrifice.

When we are suffering with the heartache of what's happening to us here and now, it's very easy to lose hope. When your eyes are filled with tears of pain, it's very hard to see that the future will be brighter. When one day your world comes crashing down around you, it's very easy to want to turn back the clock to yesterday. But BY FAITH, we move forward.

That idea of *looking forward* is a very important piece of what faith is about. Remember the story of Lot's wife? Lot was Abraham's nephew, and as Lot and his wife were escaping the

destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot's wife looked back and turned into a pillar of salt. Literally? I doubt it. But the metaphor sends a powerful message, doesn't it?

Furthermore, Jesus himself said, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God." Faith is not a backward glance. Faith is not getting stuck in the mire. Faith involves a forward motion.

Now, Abraham is not the only person whom the writer recognizes for his life of faith. In verses 4 through 8 (which were not included in today's lesson), the writer lifts up Abel, Enoch, and Noah for having lived BY FAITH. And in the verses following those we heard about Abraham, we are reminded of Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses – even Rahab, a woman.

The writer tells us, "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, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one."

These, among others, come together to form what is commonly called, "a great cloud of witnesses." They desired "a better country, a heavenly one." They looked forward to the promises. BY FAITH, they "saw and greeted them." The homeland they sought, they did finally receive.

It is because of their faith that we continue to worship God over two thousand years later. And we could all add to that list

our own ancestors who lived BY FAITH and who personally inspired us to keep moving forward in the journey of faith.

On that evening of the Last Supper that Jesus shared with his friends, he knew that the days ahead would be more difficult than anyone could imagine. And instead of looking forward to seeing God's promises fulfilled, Jesus WAS the promise for the whole world in his life, death, and resurrection. We are invited to his table to be nourished and strengthened in his undying love as we await the day when he will come again.

There will always be roads that are difficult to travel and ingredients that are distasteful and hard to digest. But we, too, can become a part of that great cloud of witnesses as we strive to live BY FAITH, moving forward and looking forward... to the glory of God.

AMEN.