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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
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Hebrew 11:1-3, 8-16

“Faith in Adversity”

Several years ago, Charles Schultz drew a Peanuts cartoon that is apropos for our subject today, which is faith.

Picture this: Charlie Brown is sitting under a tree talking to Peppermint Patty, who asks him, “What do you think security is, Chuck?” His answer: “Security is sleeping on the back seat of the car when you’re a little kid, and you’ve been somewhere with your mom and dad, and it’s night, and you’re riding home in the car, asleep. You don’t have to worry about anything-your mom and dad are in the front seat and they do all the worrying . . .they take care of everything.”

To which Peppermint Patty responds, “That’s real neat!” And Charlie Brown comments, “But it doesn’t last! Suddenly, you’re grown up, and it can never be that way again! Suddenly, it’s over, and you’ll never get to sleep in the back seat again! Never!”

Peppermint Patty asks: “Never?” and Charlie Brown says, “Absolutely never.” To which she replies, “Hold my hand, Chuck!”

Friends, if I may suggest, faith is accepting God’s hand that is held out for you and letting God do the driving.

Or, as the writer of Hebrews puts it so eloquently, with words that have comforted people for thousands of years: faith is the assurance of things hoped for, and the conviction of things not seen. I’ve repeated that phrase at many funerals over the years, and I’ve repeated it to myself during my own times of challenge and adversity. At times, those words have become my mantra – because when we’re not sure where God is leading, or we begin to wonder if God is watching over us, it’s our faith that assures us that God has our best interests at heart, knows what we hope for, and can be trusted with our future.

When Abraham and Sarah set out, they only had their faith to get through them the long journey that awaited them . . .and it was enough. Which doesn’t mean

they didn't face challenges along the way – they did. It doesn't mean they didn't encounter adversity – they did. But when the going got tough, they placed their faith in God and, as the writer says, “Looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”

The writer of Hebrews wants his listeners to know that they can count on God to get through their tough times, because they're facing some tough times! His listeners are at an all-time low and they've lost hope that Jesus will never return like he said he would. Why is it taking so long, they wondered? And when they ask God, “Hey God, why is it taking Jesus so long to come back?” God doesn't answer. So here they are, with their unanswered prayers, struggling to hold on to their faith, wondering if they should abandon ship for some other religion, when our writer says, “Hang on. Stay true to God. Have faith. Your ancestors faced the same challenges. You're not alone.”

He reminds them of Sarah and Abraham, who moved to a place they knew nothing about strictly on faith. There were no warranties, no guarantees, no bonuses to lure them except their faith in God. It would be the modern day equivalent of one of us packing up our possessions and family into a U-Haul and heading to an unknown destination because God told us to do so.

But there's more; in addition to Abraham and Sarah not knowing where they were going; they didn't know if everything was going to be OK once they got there. In fact, they were guaranteed they wouldn't see the fruition of their faith come to pass. But they journeyed because they had faith in God and God's promises.

Someone pointed out to me recently the obvious point that Abraham and Sarah's faith wasn't just something they carried on the inside, it showed up on their outside, too. It showed up in how they lived their lives. Abraham and Sarah understood that faith is a verb, it something we live by day in and day out, it's not a noun that we come to possess after gathering all the facts. In other words, when God extended God's hand to them, they took it and allowed God to be the driver.

And that's hard to do – literally and figuratively.

So some of you know that Tommy has been learning how to drive and got his license last week – and I’m thrilled and so is he. Terry and I taught Tommy – and Henry – how to drive instead of enrolling them in driver’s ed. So, I have a bit of experience as of late in letting others do the driving, and let me tell you – it’s hard. The first time Henry got into the driver’s seat he asked, “Do I use both feet?” And when Tommy merged onto the highway for the first time ever, I swear to you the biggest bus I’ve ever seen which just so happened to be pulling a truck behind it, was in the far right lane, barreling toward us, and I thought to myself, “There is nothing I can do to save us from what could be a complete disaster.” Charlotte’s face in the back seat was priceless. But Tommy did fine. He kept his composure, but admitted after the fact, “Man, I can’t imagine driving with someone the first time they went on the highway!” “Really?” I said. “I can!”

Friends, it takes trust to ride in the passenger seat, or the backseat, when you’re not sure of either a) the skill set of the driver or b) have no idea where you’re going. It’s hard. Literally and figuratively.

Because when you have faith, when you trust God to take the wheel and follow God in the direction that God wants you to go, you can never be too sure which way it is that God is going to point you. It’s like a Peanuts comic strip that has the little bird, Woodstock, flying one way in a crazy, zigzag path. And then in the next scene, he’s flying back the other way in another crazy zigzag path. Snoopy looks at him and says, "Never fall in love with a butterfly."

But the Bible seems to show us that when we have faith, when we fall in love with God, it’s a lot like falling in love with a butterfly. We know that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. But for some reason, God isn’t a big fan of straight lines. God does get us from point A to point B, but sometimes it’s by way of a route that we would have never imagined. It’s like God loves hearing the voice in our GPS say over and over again, “Recalculating” and all we want to do is get there already.

One example of this is if you look at a map of the route that the Hebrew slaves took to get from Egypt to the Promised Land. As you probably remember, it took the Hebrews 40 years to get from point A to point B following the way that God led them. But the reality is that where they ended up was less than 200 miles from where they started. 200 miles!! If they had walked in a straight line, they

could have been there in 40 days, not 40 years. But for some reason, God chose to lead the people on a round-about crazy zigzag path to get to the Promised Land.

Sometimes we wonder why God doesn't make our lives simpler than they are. We wonder why God puts all those twists and turns and detours in our way. But if we have faith, we trust –

We trust the things will be alright, even if we don't know what "alright" means.

We trust God and other people with our future, and find assurance outside ourselves.

And we trust, just like the author of Hebrews says, that God has prepared a better place, a "heavenly one" for us, as God prepared for Abraham.

We have faith, we trust, and it is essential for our survival during challenging times.

Some of you know that Terry has faced very challenging times the past few months with his job, and things that are happening at our presbytery level. It has been very challenging for him . . .and for us. And he has learned, and I've learned . . .again . . .in this process that we need to trust – other people, yes -- and that is hard at a time when we're not really feeling like we **can** trust certain people, but it is essential – and our faith has been essential too. Trusting that while the path has been circuitous, like chasing a butterfly, we can have faith that God knows where God is going, even if we don't. We can trust God to be the driver, even when it feels like a giant bus hauling a truck is barreling at you.

For you see, as someone once said, "faith is not intended for the times in life when dreams are achieved or when plans move along just as you intended. Faith is for the in-between times, the waiting times, the yearning-for-something times that last a lot longer than the successes and victories in our lives."

So much of our own journey of faith asks us to step out not knowing where we're going, but going anyway...without a roadmap or set of instructions. We don't know where God calls us to go, but we're still called to go, to begin the journey, to try new things, to continue the journey of faith, to be the people God calls us to

be, even if we won't see the fruits of our labor come to fruition. Because faith is what we need when life does not give us what we want.

Faith is about finding a way through hard times, times when you want something very, very badly and you can't seem to get it. Faith is about the way people continue to function when they can't find a job or a person to spend their life with; it's about parents who maintain hope when their errant children can't seem to get on track, and it is about couples who want children and can't get pregnant. Faith is about how to live when answers do not come and when prayers seem to go unanswered, because faith is not an answer we have to find. Faith is a way of living; it is a mature understanding that sometimes the answers we want are not there when we want them.

That was true for Abraham Sarah, and is true for us and has been true for everyone in between.

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, and the conviction of things not seen. And it's accepting God's hand of help, and sitting in the backseat, while God does the driving.

Amen.