

A BETTER COUNTRY

HEBREWS 11:1-3; 8-16
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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Summer is often thought to be a time for lighter reading. I try to have at least one book of fiction on the go throughout the year, but during summer I tend to spend even more time reading novels.

This summer, I've been reading Swedish author Henning Menkel's "Wallander Mysteries" which follow the life and times of Kurt Wallander, a police detective in a small coastal Swedish town.

These books are, in many ways, your stereotypical page-turner crime novels. They're pretty formulaic, in many ways. Not particularly deep. Like I said, good summer reading.

Having said that, in the opening pages of *Sidetracked*, I came across a passage that has stuck with me since I first read it.

The scene is, ironically, not in Sweden. It's in the Dominican Republic, where a young father who has tragically lost his wife sets out from his impoverished village for the big city in order to get his young daughter baptized:

Pedro reached the city one afternoon as the heavy rain clouds gathered on the horizon. He sat down to wait on the steps of the cathedral, Santiago Apóstol, and watched the black-clad priests passing by. They seemed either too young, or in too much of a hurry to be worthy of baptising his daughter. He waited many hours. At last an old priest came slowing towards the cathedral. Pedro stood up,

took off his straw hat, and held out his daughter. The old priest listened patiently to his story. Then he nodded.

“I will baptise her,” he said. “You have walked a long way for something you believe in. In our day that is rare. **People seldom walk long distances for their faith.** That’s why the world looks the way it does.”¹

Those last two sentences jumped out at me. *People seldom walk long distances for their faith. That’s why the world looks the way it does.*

In the context of the novel, walking long distances is literal. Pedro has walked a long way to find someone to baptize his daughter. And indeed, the Christian tradition has a long and rich history of pilgrimage—people literally walking for days, weeks, months, to visit sacred sites.

We could even look to our own Mennonite history for examples of people who have always been on the move, seeking a safe place to practice our faith, from northern Europe to Prussia to the Ukraine, to places like Paraguay and Mexico and North America.

But I think the reference to “walking long distances” can also be interpreted metaphorically.

People seldom give up much for their faith... People aren’t willing to sacrifice much for their faith... People aren’t willing to enter into the struggle of faith.

Faith, increasingly, is kind of seen as a spiritual garnish on essentially secular lives.

One term that sociologists have coined to describe the faith of modern people is “Moral Therapeutic Deism.” In his research on young adults in America, the sociologist Christian Smith found that many people hold to a version of faith that is essentially gutted of most of the church’s traditional convictions, and consists instead of

a collection of benign and generalized beliefs... that God exists, that it is important to be kind to each other, that our ultimate goal should be personal

¹ Henning Menkell, *Sidetracked: A Kurt Wallander Mystery* (New York: Random House, 1995), 7.

happiness, that God is seldom personally involved in individual lives, and that good people go to heaven when they die.²

Now, there are some good things in here, to be sure. It *is* important to be kind to one another. It *is* important to believe that God exists and that goodness matters.

But there is nothing here about taking up a cross and following, nothing about dying to self, nothing of an existential struggle for holiness and meaning and salvation.

Each of these things would have been assumed as part of discipleship throughout Christian history, but in our day “faith” seems to be a kind of easy, breezy vague assumption that God exists mainly to validate us and our desires and identity and to make our lives comfortable and purposeful.

We are only willing to walk short distances, if any distance at all, for our faith these days.

Our text from Hebrews this morning is probably the passage that offers the best example of people who were willing to walk long distances for their faith, literally and metaphorically.

The book of Hebrews was written to a persecuted church of Jewish people in the Greek culture of the Roman Empire.

We don’t know *who* wrote the book of Hebrews, but we do know that it was written roughly a generation or so after Jesus’ death and resurrection to encourage a group of Christians to persevere in their faith.

And Hebrews has a lot to say about faith. What *is* faith? What does faith look like?

We’ll get to what Hebrews says in a minute, but we might pause here to ask how these questions might be answered in our context.

For many people in our culture, “faith” is contrasted with “knowledge.” For many people, “faith” = “stuff people think without any evidence” or even *despite* the evidence.

² Jonathan Grant, *Divine Sex: A Compelling Vision for Christian Relationships in a Hypersexualized Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2015), 124.

During my research on faith and atheism in graduate school, I came across all kinds of people who were downright *hostile* to faith.

Even for those who aren't hostile, many kind of have a "whatever floats your boat" kind of approach. Faith is whatever you need to believe to get you through the day.

Faith doesn't always have a very good name in our world.

By contrast, the author of Hebrews says this:

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for.

Faith is not "stuff in my head that I can't prove but clench my teeth to believe." It is, rather, "the assurance of things *hoped* for, the conviction of things not seen."

It is a deeply held conviction that there is more to this world than meets the eye, more than can be measured, observed, and evaluated—that, as Hamlet famously said,

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy

And faith is movement. Faith is walking long distances, literally and metaphorically, with God, for God, and toward the future God has promised. Faith is struggle and uncertainty. Faith is walking even when the road ahead is unclear.

Abraham is the focus of our passage today. Abraham was called by God to leave his home in Ur (present day southern Iraq) and travel to a land God would show him (Gen. 12:1). Abraham didn't know where he was going or what it would look like, but he went.

Abraham lived as a stranger in a strange land, living in tents in anticipation of a promise he couldn't yet understand (Heb. 11:9).

Abraham and Sara endured many long childless years despite being promised that their descendants would be a great nation. Finally, Isaac was born when Abraham and Sara were old and long past childbearing years.

Faith is waiting and wondering and longing and failing and trying again.

Abraham's is just one story.

If we were to read the omitted verses. 4-7 as well as the remainder of chapter 11, we would see that Abraham's story of faith is like countless others in Scripture. They all involved "walking long distances."

Hebrews 11 is a kind of "honour roll of faith."

It has an almost poetic structure to it, with a whole number of "by faiths" followed by the stories of the Old Testament saints.

- *By faith* Abel brought God a better offering than Cain (11:4)
- *By faith* Noah built an ark (11:7)
- *By faith* Abraham left his home even though he didn't know where he was going (11: 8-12)
- *By faith* Abraham offered his son Isaac as a sacrifice (11:17-19)
- *By faith* Moses' parents hid him from the Egyptians (11:23)
- *By faith* Moses chose to be mistreated along with the Israelites and led his people out of Egypt (11:27-29)
- *By faith* the Israelites conquered the city of Jericho into the promised land (11:30)
- *By faith* Rahab harboured spies in Jericho (11:31)

That's just a snapshot. The writer goes on to tell us that he doesn't have time to mention all of the other people who sacrificed in pursuit of and obedience to God. But we get the idea.

God's story has always been moved along by people who were willing to "walk long distances" with God as an expression of faith.

And, of course, stuff happens when you walk long distances.

Each and every one of these heroes was a real human being who made real mistakes and experienced real doubts on their journeys of faith.

Abraham *did* leave his land and he *did* follow God into the unknown. But he had his moments of doubt as well. Rather than waiting for God, he took matters into his own hands when he and Sara continued to be childless into their old age. He decided that since kids didn't seem to be coming from Sara, he would use his Egyptian slave Hagar.

Moses *was* a pillar of faith in leading his people out of slavery in Egypt, but he took a lot of convincing to get started, didn't he (send Aaron!)? And Moses felt quite free to argue and plead with God, even changing God's mind at one point about destroying the Israelites for their idolatry (Exodus 32-33)!

We could go on... Samson and David each took significant detours in their journeys of faith—times where they did not follow as they ought to have.

The honour roll of Hebrews 11 is not meant to hold up to us shining examples of people who always walked perfectly.

It is meant to show us an example of people who were determined to follow and who kept going.

It is meant to tell us the stories of people who were sure of what they hoped for. People who were convinced that the God they could not see was the only one who could meet their deepest need.

Hebrews 11 also reminds us that each and every one of these heroes of faith continued to follow on the journey, *despite never seeing the end goal!*

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 (Heb. 11: 13-16).

This is *really* important. There will always be things we don't see, things we don't know, things we don't understand on our journey of faith.

This realization saves us from overly triumphal understandings of faith where just having enough faith is the recipe for the life we've always wanted.

There is adventure and uncertainty and surprise, certainly, but there will probably also be confusion and uncertainty at times as we walk the journey of faith. There was for Abraham, there was for Moses, there was for every other person who has walked the journey of faith.

That's just the nature of the journey.

Some of you know this very well. Some are people who know what it means to only see that which we hope for from a distance.

- Some of you know what it is to leave home, like Abraham
- Some of you know what it means to long for a child, like Sarah
- Some of you know, like Joseph, what it's like to experience rejection from those closest to them
- Some of you know what it's like to watch loved ones suffer
- Some of you know what it's like to pray and pray and pray and never receive the answer you're hoping for
- Some of you know what it is to struggle with doubt
- Some of you know firsthand that the life of faith isn't easy—that faith does not mean the absence of suffering

Whatever our journey of faith has looked like or will look like, we need this reminder that *all of these heroes of faith* died not receiving what was ultimately promised.

But they kept walking.

I want to close by shamelessly switching metaphors. We've been talking about faith as walking long distances. I want to end with *how* we walk.

I came across this metaphor in, of all things, a book on sexuality this week.

Imagine for a moment an area of a city that is of historical interest. There are two very different ways of getting to know that area. The first is the sort of knowledge that a new tour guide possesses... He gathers this information from maps, books, and other external sources, which give him important functional information that enables him to navigate the area.... Yet as vast as the guide's

knowledge might become, there is still a yawning gap in the *amount* of information as well as the *depth* of knowledge he acquires as compared with someone who grew up in that area...

[T]he local possesses a deep and complex intuitive understanding. This knowledge, accumulated over years of discovery and practice, has largely passed from cognitive thinking into the unconscious part of his being. **It has become part of his essential identity, and he will always be “from there.”** Without thinking, he knows a hundred different ways to get from one part of town to another... What’s more, he knows journeys and histories that don’t appear on a map or in a book—such as the shortcuts across the backyards of friends and neighbors. He knows the story of each family

I couldn’t help but think of an experience I often have here in Lethbridge. Someone will ask me where something is and I won’t be able to provide street names or addresses, but I’ll just say, “well, you turn at the Penny Coffee House and drive by the old post office and head past City Hall...”

I know this because I’m *from here*. It’s part of who I am.

The first understanding of faith produces “religious tourists.” The second produces residents in the “neighbourhood of the gospel.”

The first involves a consumers’ approach to faith that is always asking, “What can God or Christianity do for me?” The second knows that the more important question is, “How can I allow God to form me into the image of Christ as I walk?”

The first allows us to drop down into interesting terrain until the conditions deteriorate or we get bored. The second forces us to move in to the neighbourhood and settle in for the long haul.

The first demands little of us. The second requires our very lives.

The world needs less religious tourists and more residents in the neighbourhood of the gospel.

The world needs more people who are willing to walk long distances for their faith, and in walking to understand the terrain a bit better, to appreciate the contours of the journey a bit more.

The world needs more people who can say of life with Christ, "It's not just a place I visit from time to time, it's where I'm from." It's who I am.

It's the way that I have been walking and the way I will continue to walk, even when the walking is hard.

Because I see a better country, even if only from a distance. And I know the One who has promised to lead me there.

May God help us to be those who walk long distances for our faith.

Amen.

