

The Reverend Patricia Phaneuf Alexander
Proper 14 (C) ~ August 10, 2025
St. Dunstan's, Bethesda
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16
Psalm 33:12-22
Luke 12:32-40

Get going!

This morning I invite you to think back to the very beginning of the age-old love story between God and God's people. I am speaking, of course, about Genesis, the first book of the Bible, the start of Scripture, the collection of stories about origins, "how things got the way they are," and fresh starts. Genesis is the Book of Beginnings, after all. The first 11 chapters of Genesis contain a lot of what scholars consider mythology – the Garden of Eden, Noah's Ark, the Tower of Babel – stories that have counterparts in other cultural traditions of the time. But things change in Chapter 12. In Genesis 12 begins the historical, verifiable account of God's relationship with His people, starting with the great "Father of the Faith," Abraham.

Genesis 12 begins with God telling Abraham, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you...So [he] went, as the LORD had told him" (Genesis 12:1,4).

Notice that the very first historical, verifiable command we hear in the Bible is *Get going!*

And Abraham did get going. He and his wife, Sarah, moved. They heard the call of God and responded, journeying by stages toward a place they did not know. They hit detour after detour after roadblock, but they persisted. (If you're not familiar with the story of Abraham, I encourage you to take a look.)

But how did Abraham *know*? How could he be *sure*? What *proof* did he have?

From today's Epistle, a portion of the Book of Hebrews:

*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.*

Abraham had nothing in writing – no contract, no guarantees. But he did have faith – in Greek, *pistis*.

Let's talk about faith for a moment.

So often we are told, “just have faith” – as though it were something we could manufacture, conjure up on the spot. And if we struggle with faith, well then – that's our problem, right?

No. Wrong. At least, that's not what the Greek says here. According to biblical linguists,

Faith (4102 / *pistis*) is always a *gift from God*, and *never* something that can be produced by people...[*Pistis*] is "God's *divine persuasion*" – and therefore distinct from human belief.¹

Did you catch that? Faith is *God's* “divine persuasion.” The onus is on God to do the persuading, not on us to generate the faith. So the next time someone tells you to “just have more faith,” feel free to ignore them, with my blessing. It doesn't work quite that way.

What we *can* do, though, is listen – deeply – to the nudges and stirrings within us that are signs of God's holy work of persuasion.

¹ <https://biblehub.com/greek/4102.htm>

What sets Abraham apart is that something within him – a “still, small voice,” perhaps, or a sense of call – inspired him to “get going.” And that didn’t only affect his and Sarah’s lives, but it altered the course of history forever.

It was Abraham’s response to that nudge, that call, that ultimately launched three of the world’s great religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. You might say it’s why we are here today. God persuaded Abraham, Abraham listened, and the rest is history.

And here’s the thing: If that could happen to Abraham, why couldn’t it to you and me, too?

Now, before you start putting up roadblocks and crafting your counter-argument, please hear me out. Remember that it’s not about *us* – *our* faithfulness, *our* worthiness. It’s about God doing the persuading.

If you were to go back and study the lives of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob – or Peter and Paul and Mary Magdalene, for that matter – you would discover that they were just ordinary folk, regular people leading imperfect one-day-at-a-time lives, when they were called to become significant people in the plans and purposes of God.

“Therefore,” continues the author of Hebrews, “God is not ashamed to be called their God” (Hebrews 11:16). Put another way, God is not dishonored to be their God.

Imagine: As misguided and flawed as most of the principal players in the Bible are, God is not dishonored when they listen and respond. They make mistakes, they misunderstand, they fail...but they “desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.” That *desire* for change, that *longing* for movement and momentum, for progress and promise, for redemption and resurrection, makes all the difference – for these biblical figures, and for us.

But that doesn't necessarily mean that change happens according to our timetable – or even during our earthly journey, for that matter. As we also hear in Hebrews, “All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them.” One commentator puts it so well: “God's plans are always bigger than our lifetimes.”² Indeed, God's plans *are* bigger than our lifetimes. The invitation is for us to listen and trust that our participation in those plans – limited though it may be – can actually change the course of the world. That's how we can help bring about the Kingdom of God here on earth.

Here is an example of one of our own who died helping to bring about the Kingdom of God here on earth. This coming week the Episcopal Church remembers Jonathan Myrick Daniels, a young man in his late twenties who was preparing for the priesthood in Cambridge, Massachusetts in March 1965, when he heard the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. on television. Dr. King was appealing for volunteers to join him in the voting rights movement in Selma, Alabama. And Daniels listened. “I knew that I must go to Selma,” he later wrote.

So Jonathan went, as the LORD, through Dr. King, had told him. Sponsored by the Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial Unity, he traveled to Selma, where he lived and worked among Black families, campaigning vigorously for racial justice for the next several months. He witnessed a lot of ugliness in the summer of 1965. Nevertheless, he wrote: “The faith with which I went to Selma has not changed; it has grown.”

Daniels' faith was put to the ultimate test on August 14th, when he and several others were arrested for demonstrating publicly. Released unexpectedly, they took refuge in a small shop, out of the increasingly-dangerous streets. There they saw Ruby Sales, a sixteen-year-old Black girl, approaching the door. Before

² Stephen J. March, www.marchsite.com (October 2005).

Ruby could cross the threshold, a sheriff's deputy appeared, armed with a 12-gauge gun, blocking her path and cursing her. Jonathan Daniels jumped up and pulled Ruby aside – at which point he himself was shot, point-blank in the chest. He died instantly.

His biographer wrote:

When Jon Daniels went to Alabama in 1965, he had no experience in the Deep South and knew little about southern race relations...Unlike many other northern students involved in the movement, he did not come from a radical environment or even from a politically active family, and he had no personal political agenda.³

So why in the world would Jonathan Daniels go to Selma? Why would he do such a crazy, dangerous thing? I believe that, deep within him, he experienced God saying GO! Like Abraham, this remarkable young man “set out, not knowing where he was going.” If he *had* known, perhaps he might have chosen to stay safely in Cambridge and finish his seminary studies. But he “looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God,” and so he took the risk, and went. And I daresay God is not ashamed to be called his God.

In *Out of Africa*, Danish author Isak Dinesen writes: “The earth was made round so that we would not see too far down the road.” How true! Because if any of us had the capacity to see beyond the horizon, how many would ever even get out of bed in the morning? Consider how many things you would not have done, how many journeys you would not have taken, if you had had any idea of the detours and roadblocks you would encounter along the way. But “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Faith is about listening to our God-given desire for change – the deep longing for movement,

³ Charles W. Eagles, *Outside Agitator: Jon Daniels and the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2000).

for progress, for resurrection – and responding. However haltingly. However imperfectly.

Since coming out of COVID, we at St. Dunstan's have devoted *a lot* of time and energy to building this congregation up again, focusing intently on Church growth. It is right that we have done this, and it's so rewarding to see faces here this morning who were *not* with us a few years ago. We can feel good about this. *And...* we are not meant to stop here, to become complacent. Christians are a pilgrim people, after all. The call is to turn and start moving toward the *next* destination that God has prepared for us. It might really demand something of us – demand that we take a risk to help bring about the Kingdom of God here on earth. What might that look like? I don't have the road map in front of me, but I assure you that *God* does. Our job is to listen and follow.

Put another way: How is Abraham's story, how is Jonathan Daniels' story, *our* story? How is God beckoning us toward the Promised Land? How is God calling us, individually or collectively, to help bring about some healing and new life in our broken world?

We may not be able to see too far down the road, but together we can “look forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”

Let's get going.

Amen.