“***A Better Country***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, August 18, 2019

**Genesis 15:1–6**

1After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” 2But Abram said, “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?”3And Abram said, “You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.” 4But the word of the Lord came to him, “This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.” 5He brought him outside and said, “Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” 6And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

**Hebrews 11:1–3, 8–10, 16**

1Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. 2Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval.3By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible. . . .

8 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. 9By 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. 10For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. . . .

16 They desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

The Abraham passage is early in the story, in fact before his name gets changed to Abraham. He is still Abram, here. This is the story of how he believed the promise that he and Sarah would have a boy child to be his heir. The fact that he *believed* that promise is important. Centuries later, the Apostle Paul will point at this story and say “see? Salvation has *always* been by faith. Abraham was reckoned righteous *because* he believed” (see Gal 3:6-8).

But I want to draw attention to an earlier part of Abram’s story, the beginning. There, the Lord calls him, saying “Go from your country . . . to the land that I will show you. . . . and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:1, 3). And Abram goes, as the Lord told him. This is the *really* big step of faith to which I want to draw attention. Abram leaves his comfortable dwelling place in the world’s most civilized city, Ur, and travels over a thousand miles up the Euphrates and then down into the hill country of Canaan in order to learn something about God. I think that’s a step of faith, to trust that promise and then have to organize the caravan and convince some people to go with him. His wife, his father, brother, and nephew Lot all come with him. Halfway to Canaan, they stopped in Harran, in what we would now call eastern Turkey, which was apparently their ancestral homeland. His father, Terah, died there. Abram sets out again, and gets to Canaan. He stops first at the Canaanite city of Shechem, then moves on to Bethel, building altars to the Lord in both sites. The story of Abram’s interaction with the Lord unfolds from there. He trusted God’s promise of a son, but before that he had trusted a promise that got him to make that risky and expensive move away from Ur in the first place.

Now the anonymous New Testament letter, Hebrews, spends a whole chapter praising the heroes of faith. He talks about Abraham’s obeying and setting out from his home, “not knowing where he was going,” living in a “foreign land, living in tents” (11:8–9), hoping to receive an inheritance. Now the first part of the promise is fulfilled when his son Isaac is born, and then later when Isaac fathers two sons, Esau and Jacob, but they still have to endure living in tents and waiting for the *rest* of the promise (of land and numerous offspring) to be fulfilled. Hebrews says they all desired “a better country, that is, a heavenly one” (11:16).

Hebrews seems to be building on the yearning that many emigrants have: the hope for a better country and a better life. But he is also saying there was a *spiritual* meaning to that hope. He is saying that, underlying Abraham’s earthly journey from Ur to Salem, was his desire for a more spiritual life. It was really a journey from earth to heaven. He says God had prepared a city for them—a *heavenly* city, “whose architect and builder is God” (11:10). They also inherited some earthly land, and they fathered offspring. But, more importantly, they inherited a heavenly destination. Spiritual fulfillment comes to all who exercise faith. There are more things in heaven than we can imagine; in fact, Hebrews says, “worlds were prepared by the word of God” (11:3). God has prepared whole worlds for our ascension career!

Know that, for each one of us, there is a payoff if we develop our understanding of God’s will and God’s way, and then do our best to be loyal to that understanding. There will certainly be results when we practice faith, but we don’t usually see them right away. We have to persist in our faith. Hebrews talks of Abraham dwelling in a foreign land and living in tents while waiting. We, too, have to live in places that are not our real destination. We, too, may have to wait a long time to see the fruition of our hopes and our values. That seems to be part of the rulebook about the earthly life. You have to be decisive and diligent, and then you have to be patient and persistent.

But I also want to say something about the intellectual side of the waiting and working. Each of us has to develop our understanding of God’s way, and of God’s truth. We can’t just accept it from the minister, or even from the Bible—without using our minds. It is our minds that *interpret* and absorb what we hear and what we read, even if we claim that we are not interpreting. We filter what we read; we digest it. *We* give it meaning; *we* decide what to take to heart. Go ahead and become aware of that process. In order to make truth your *own*, you chew on it, you compare it with what’s already in your mind, and you adapt it, making it your own. Only *after* such reflection do you make biblical values your *own* values, ones that your mind has chosen.

You are constructing your philosophy, and that takes time. Sometimes you have to stay in a place without knowing exactly where you are. Time may drag on, while you live in tents and wait for a glimpse of where you are going and an opportunity to get there. Hang in there. God is working. And *you* need to be working, too, reflecting upon your understanding of truth, and then being *loyal* to that understanding. Have confidence in that “city [whose] foundations” were built by God (Heb 11:10). You may be able to manifest some of the city of God here on earth. As Paul says, “I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion” (Phil 1:6). God is working on us all the time that we are living in tents and waiting for the promise to be fulfilled.