

Future Faith

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The Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
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Genesis 15:1-6; Hebrews 11:1-2, 8-10; Luke 12:32-40

“For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” -- Hebrews 11:10

If you look around our sanctuary on a typical Sunday morning, you won't have to look long to see that most of us are well past what we might call “young” even by the most flexible definition of that word. And a typical Sunday morning for us is typical for most churches in our religious tradition, what we used to call the mainstream, but is now called the side-lined. Young people don't seem to be particularly interested in our way of being church these days, and many of them, in fact, hold quite negative views of the institutional church.

A number of researchers have reported that among people under thirty who don't attend church, well over a third of them have a bad impression of present-day Christianity, and that bad impression is pretty bad indeed. Nine of the top twelve impressions young people outside the church have of us inside the church are negative. They think, among other things, that we're anti-gay, that we're judgmental, that we're hypocritical, that we're old-fashioned, that we're out of touch with reality, and we're boring.

Well, okay, maybe we are boring. Given the previews that we see at the movie theaters these days, there's not much chance of keeping up with the rapid-fire images of sex and violence that flash across the screen, and if that's what the normal pace of life and way of life for young people is, then yes, we're boring. Guilty as charged.

And maybe we are old-fashioned. I admit that, and I'm not terribly worried about it. I suspect that every generation of young people has considered the church old-fashioned at one point or another in their lives. I certainly did when I was younger, and I suspect many of you did, too.

And in spite of our efforts in the UCC to be relevant and culturally engaged, I suspect we are perceived by many as being out of touch with reality. That's a charge that's been leveled against the church from its beginning, and we'll always be susceptible to the accusation. When your primary business is God – tasteless, odorless, colorless, silent and immaterial God – lots of people will think you're not dealing with reality, at least not the reality that they know. What's really real for most people is what comes to us through our five physical senses, and if you can't eat it, drive it, wear it, live in it, or put it in the bank, many people will ask, What good is it?

Such is the life of faith. Lots of people will ask, What good is it? What good is there in believing in stuff that no one can see or hear or taste or touch? What good is believing in miracles? What good is believing in another reality? What good is believing in God?

The answer, in part, comes from this morning's text. “For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” That's the tenth verse of the famous eleventh chapter of Hebrews, and it's talking about Abraham, that great dreamer who was sufficiently out of touch with reality that he and Sarah packed up the

camels and the servants and the rugs and the pots and pans and left their ancestral home in Mesopotamia to go to a new place to start a new nation – in their old age. Two old people, childless, head out to start a new country. A country with people. A nation of descendants, and they don't even have a single child. And they're well past the age of making babies on their own.

But off they go all the same, not because of their past, but rather because of their future. Whatever disappointments their childless past may have brought them, whatever frustrations and uncertainties, whatever dim prospects, their future beckoned because that's where God called them. God called them into an unknown future, an unlikely future, a future neither of them could have imagined, because that's where God was and is. God calls all of us to the future, because that's where God is waiting.

God never calls us into the past. The past, as we sometimes say as part of our assurance of pardon, is finished and gone. What's done is done. We fix our mistakes not by revisiting them over and over, not by dwelling on them, not by beating ourselves up about them, and certainly not by repeating them, but by moving on, having learned from our experience. And those who do not learn from their experience, as historians frequently remind us, are doomed to repeat it. The Princeton philosopher Diogenes Allen says that the only way forward is forward, and that's the movement of the Christian faith: "He looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God."

There is – or should be, anyway – in all Christians a sense of what has been called "divine discontent," a sense of restlessness with the world, a sense that while the sun may be shining and God may be in his heaven, all is nonetheless not right with the world.

"I'm just a poor, wayfaring stranger," is the way our African-American ancestors put it in their music, "a-travelin' through this world of woe." For enslaved Africans – who really weren't treated like Americans at all – this world was very much one of woe, and part of the danger for comfortable middle-class folks like us is that this world is much too comfortable. We have made our peace with the world and it's too often on the world's terms. We have settled down, settled in, and adapted the routine of the world to ourselves and made it our own. We have become virtually indistinguishable from our non-Christian, non-religious, non-church-going neighbors. We have lost the radical nature of Jesus' life and teachings.

And that's why, in this church, we keep moving. We move forward into the future God has for us even though we don't know what it is. We don't, but God does, and that's all that matters.

Our future, like our present and like our past, is in God's hands, and we believe that future is secure. It may be disastrous, but it is secure. It may not be to our liking, but it is secure. It may not come out as we planned, hoped, or expected, but it is secure. It is secure because it is God's, and the future belongs not to those who try to grab it, control it, and steer it according to their designs – how many best-laid plans have gone astray that way? -- but rather the future belongs to those who belong to the one to whom the future belongs. I'll say that again: the future belongs to those who belong to the one to whom the future belongs. The future, in other words, is ours, provided we are God's.

That's how you control the future. That's how you predict the future. That's how you shape the future. You don't do it by plotting, scheming, and trying to keep your party in power; you do it by opening yourself up to the leading of God's spirit, and making yourself completely irrelevant to the world's standards, the world's demands, and the world's expectations. The last thing in this world I would wish for any of you, my friends, and I would hope that you would not wish for yourselves, is that you would fit in. Fitting in this broken, wounded, deluded, violent, unjust world is the very last thing you should want for yourself or anyone you care about.

You should *not* want to fit in. You should *not* want to look like everyone else. You should *not* be happy with the way things are. You should be on the move, moving toward that “city that has foundations, whose builder and architect is God.”

So yes, perhaps, we are a little old-fashioned here in the church, and a little irrelevant, and a little boring. Perhaps we're all of those things, and more, by the standards of those who don't seem to want to have much to do with us. And that's okay by me, because I don't take my marching orders from those around me.

I take my marching orders from the one within me, beside me, and beyond me, who beckons me forward, forward, always forward, toward that place that is not yet. That place not made with hands, but with a divine spirit, where the Lamb and not the wolf is at the center of the throne, where we are led with compassion to the water of life, and where God will wipe away every tear from every eye.

However long it takes to get here – or to get us from here to there -- that's the future I believe in, and that's the future waiting for all who will accept God's invitation to it. That invitation has your name on it; I urge you to accept.