

SERMON CCI Hebrews 11: 7-12 2-17-19

Life is uncertain. On Friday morning, 45-year-old Gary Martin clocked in to work at his usual time of 7 am at the Henry Pratt Company in Aurora, IL. where he had worked for 14 years. Sometime late in his shift he found out he'd been let go. It's still not clear whether he was fired or laid off, but the result was the same. He was suddenly out of work. Some of us have been in that scary place of losing our job unexpectedly. And in those moments after he received the news, Gary Martin had choices make about his future. Gary made the tragic choice to grab his gun and go out killing some of his coworkers, injuring others, as well as policemen, and dying himself.

Not all change is as dramatic as that. But life's changes bring choices about how we will respond. No matter how much effort we put into keeping our lives calm and peaceful, circumstances change. Worry won't stop it, having plenty of money in the bank doesn't prevent it, even being a Christian doesn't protect against change. Uncertainty is a part of life. So what does living by faith look like when life can change so quickly? Today's faith heroes give us some insight into this question.

The first hero of faith in our scripture reading is Noah. Genesis tells us that God told Noah a great flood was coming because God was disturbed by the evil behavior of humans. He saw their violence, the corruption, the sexual immorality, and worst of all, God saw that the intentions of their hearts were evil. They weren't making mistakes of judgment, they weren't forgetting to do what was right, they weren't confused, or deceived; they enjoyed doing wrong and chose to sin intentionally.

Genesis 6 makes an amazing statement: God regretted having made humans on the earth "and it grieved him to his heart." I am struck by the image of God being so grieved that he regretted ever creating living beings. The plants he created, the rivers, lakes and oceans, the mountains and the valleys and deserts, and the planets all behaved as they were created to, but humans, who are the only part of creation that was created in God's very image... they did what they wanted regardless of whether it was wrong or corrupt. There are days when I believe that Genesis 6 describes today's world pretty well. Marriages and families breaking down, sex trafficking, drug abuse, violence of every kind, robberies, mass shootings, wars, people dying in poverty, corruption on every level. We live in a very broken world. I've known young couples who chose not to have children, not because they couldn't, but because they didn't want any more children to face the

world we live in. Is that something like God felt when he regretted creating humans?

But Noah stood out as a righteous man. So God let Noah in on his plans to destroy earth's living creatures before they destroyed the rest of creation. Because of Noah's righteousness, he and his family, and a remnant of animals would survive- if Noah built an ark. There were Noah and his family- going along enjoying a reasonably good life, living a godly life, when out of the blue, dramatic change arrived. Everything about the life they knew would soon be destroyed in a flood. And suddenly, Noah had a choice to make. Will he believe God and build the ark, or not? After all, who ever heard of a flood in the desert? Maybe he was as clumsy with a hammer and nails as I am! What if he builds an ark and the rain never comes? On the surface, it was a crazy idea. So will he trust God's warning or not?

Hebrews tells us that Noah did heed God's warning, and long before the storm clouds began to form in the sky or the first drops of rain began to fall, he stepped out by faith and reverently began to build the ark. It was an act of faith. Noah wasn't educated in ark building, he had never seen a flood before, he had no idea how the animals would get onto the ark, and yet, by faith he started to build. And by faith, Noah proved God right and condemned all those who doubted and died. Because of his choice of faith, Noah became an heir to all God's future promises.

Now let's look at Abraham and Sarah. Abraham and Sarah lived about 4,000 years ago in a place called Ur of the Chaldees not far from the mouth of the Persian Gulf. Abraham and Sarah were a successful, wealthy, elderly couple with servants and property and livestock. Life had been very good to them except for one thing- they were unable to have a son to pass on the family name. Genesis tells us that when Abraham and Sarah were 75 years old, God promised them the son they had longed for. But first... God called Abraham to move to a place God would give him as an inheritance. Abraham wanted a son, but God had more in store for Abraham than just becoming a father. God wanted to make Abraham the father of a people marked by their common faith. Abraham heard God's call and went.

Abraham didn't even know where he was going, he didn't know how long it would take to get there, and he didn't even know how he would know when he arrived. What a crazy idea! Are you like me and prefer to have hotel reservations made, a map or GPS to follow so we don't get lost, and good tires on the car before we head on a long trip? And that's just for a vacation. All Abraham knew

was that God had called him to go and that for his faith, God would provide the son he and Sarah longed for. In fact, his heirs would one day outnumber the sands of the sea. Every other detail was up in the air. God called, and by faith, Abraham obeyed and uprooted his household. Like Noah, he stepped out by faith, trusting God to work out the details that mattered.

Verse 9 says “By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise.”

Abraham and Sarah left their beautiful home in Ur to “live in tents” in Canaan. God had promised Abraham the land he now lived on ... yet they lived like strangers in a foreign land. Not putting down final roots in their new place. They would wait 25 years for their son Isaac to be born. 25 years is a long time to wait, and if you take the time to read Abraham’s story in Genesis, you’ll find he had his days of trying to help God keep his promise by having a baby with a woman besides Sarah. He got a son, but it wasn’t the son God promised and that decision backfired terribly. And he had his days of depression when the wait became more than he could handle. But each time he faltered, he returned to God for reassurance and by faith, he waited until it was God’s time. By faith, Sarah finally received her miracle baby. Hundreds more years would pass before God’s promise of a huge family was completely fulfilled. Abraham and Sarah never saw it happen. They also never saw something else God knew- that about 2000 years later his heirs would include people not born into the family, but people adopted into the family by faith in Christ. Galatians 3:29 tells us that:

If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. That’s you and me, gentiles, and all followers of Christ by faith around the world. By faith, we’re part of Abraham’s heirs that God promised would outnumber the sands of the sea.

By faith, Abraham looked beyond this life for a city with firm foundations, a city with buildings that would never crumble because its builder and maker is God.

Christians have always looked to heaven as the city God designed for his people to spend eternity together. Revelation 21 tells us that in the city God built there are no tears, no sorrow ... no regret ... no remorse. Evil is gone forever. Cancer, heart attacks, and mass shootings have no place. People are reunited with their loved ones in Christ. No more moving. No more ark building. And best of all, God himself is there among his people, we’ll see God face-to-face. It’s not clear

that Abraham understood totally, but that's the city God had planned for Abraham and his legacy. By faith, he did understand enough that this life is temporary and to not put down permanent roots. Like the old hymn:

This world is not my home, I'm just a'passing through. My treasures are laid up, somewhere beyond the blue. Faith is forward looking and sees beyond this life to God's final culmination of time and eternity.

So what do we learn about living by faith from these three people? First, living by faith means stepping out in faith even before we have all our questions answered and all the details lined up. When God calls, by faith, we go. By faith we trust that God keeps his promises in his time, that all the details that are important will fall into place, and we leave room for God's plan to work out differently than we expect because God's plans are so much bigger than ours.

I wish it could be written about me that "God called and Barb went." But it can't. When I first heard God's call into ministry I was probably in my mid-40's. I was settled in my nursing career and pursuing a Masters in Nursing Administration. I had always loved being a nurse; nursing gave me so many opportunities to make a difference in Jesus' name. But I began to sense God's call into ministry, and it made no sense to me. I was a middle-aged woman with a family, I didn't enjoy speaking in front of people, and I wasn't sure God called women into pastoral ministry anyway. From my childhood, I had learned the scriptures about women staying silent and not being allowed to teach. Even though I knew a few female pastors, I wasn't impressed.

It was years before I would finally accept God's call and pursue worship ministry training. We had moved to Iowa and in addition to teaching nursing, I was also the worship leader at our church. But serve as a worship **pastor**? Me? I had to have one of those burning bush experiences like Moses had. I had lots of reasonable objections: "But God, I'm not a public speaker, I may play the piano, but I'm not musically gifted, I don't know how to lead a choir, besides, what church wants a worship pastor my age?" God's response back was as clear as a human voice: "You're right, Barb, you don't have what it takes. But it doesn't matter who **you are**, what matters is who I AM and I AM calling you." I fell to my knees. God could see that I was responding to his call by fear and not by faith. Fear that I didn't have what it takes, fear of failing, fear of rejection. Staying in nursing would be easier and safer; I knew what I was doing as a nurse; nursing was comfortable. But God was calling me to a different path. And finally, by faith, I went where God was leading me. After my education, I never was hired as a worship pastor; after 6

years seeking a position in a church, God called me to be the Chaplain at Judson Park instead, something I had never considered. Talk about learning to leave room for God's plan to work out differently!

Noah, Abraham and Sarah all came to a point where they had to choose whether to step out in faith **before** they could see what was ahead, or whether they were going to let fear keep them just doing what they already knew, what seemed safe and comfortable. They all had good lives and were already living righteously when God called them. Praise God they chose to step out in faith. When life brings change in our lives, what guides our decisions? Is it fear of the unknown, or is it faith in the God who walks with us? Is it fear of losing what's comfortable, or losing what we love, or is it faith in the God we serve? I wish Gary Martin had made decisions by faith rather than fear. His coworkers would still be alive.

As a congregation, as you face the decisions that are ahead about your future, the same questions are important. What will guide your thinking and your decisions? Will it be fear of the unknown, or faith in the God who walks with you? Will it be fear of losing what's comfortable or what you love, or will it be faith in the God you serve?

Second: Noah, Abraham and Sarah all received a call from God to put their faith in action. And they each responded with "Yes, Lord." In this time of discernment about your future, you've looked at five options before you. Each one has its promises and its risks. And everyone here has their own preferences. But the real question is not, "Which option looks best for the majority of us?" or "Which one feels best?" The real question is "What is God calling you to do?"

I know that we're all praying for wisdom as you proceed and I believe God will give you the wisdom. So starting this week, I am inviting you to add something to your personal times of prayer for the future of this church. I invite you to not only ask God for wisdom, but that you spend some time listening for God to speak his call. Like Noah, Abraham and Sarah, you need to hear what he's calling you to do. Now I admit, it's not easy to be silent and listen for very long, we can get nervous or impatient, and our minds wander. But we hear God's still small voice better when we're not always talking at him. So I invite you to sit still and listen, you can listen while you go for a walk, or as you fall asleep at night. Whatever helps you quiet your own voice and listen for God's. So will you join me in praying for wisdom and also listening for God's voice? May the legacy of Community Church of Issaquah be that you stepped out in faith to follow God's call.

WELCOMING TWILA BARTLOW INTO MEMBERSHIP

Twila, do you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord? I do.

Twila, do you believe in your heart God raised him from the dead? I do.

Twila, have you been baptized by immersion on profession of your faith? I have.

Minister: Do you covenant to continue to grow as a faithful follower of Jesus Christ, to love, support and pray for this congregation, and to use your gifts to build this body and serve in the world?

New Member: *With God's strength, I will.*

Minister: Congregation, do you covenant or promise to also continue to grow as faithful followers of Jesus Christ, to love, support and pray for Twila and one another, and to use your gifts to build this body and serve in the world?

Congregation: *With God's strength, we will.*

Twila Bartlow, on behalf of this congregation, I give you the right hand of fellowship and welcome you into this body of Christ.

HYMN # 408

How Firm a Foundation