

It happened for me on the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge one Sunday afternoon in February 2007. It was my second year of seminary in Berkeley, California. I had just finished my usual Sunday responsibilities as minister-in-training at First Congregational Church of San Rafael and was on I-580 back to my apartment in Berkeley. The wheels of my Honda Accord had just left the land-supported concrete road for the more complicated, structured support of the bridge. To my left, I had a dazzling view of the San Francisco Bay. The water was a deep blue-green dotted with sailboats, the sky shone with a brilliant blue above, and off in the distance, in the Port of Oakland, I could see the cranes that lifted shipping containers from the shipping vessels rising above the white-grey haze of where water meets land. It was at that moment, with that view, with the cities of Richmond, Berkeley, Oakland, and San Francisco spread before me, that I felt like I was going home.

Many times since that Sunday afternoon 3½ years ago I’ve pondered that particular moment in which I had a very real, very palpable sense that whatever lay ahead for me on the other side of that bridge would indeed lead me home and not to South Dakota where I grew up. Somehow something of those cities and my brief life lived among them had become my true north, the direction toward which the compass of my heart would forever point.

Abraham and his descendents that we hear about in today’s scripture reading were searching for a homeland. They may not have crossed 20th century architectural marvels like the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge, but the stories of their travels in the book of Genesis let us know that they were seasoned travelers as they sought the homeland God had promised Abraham. God had intervened in Abraham and Sarah’s lives, promising a place for them and all their descendents. To read the stories of Genesis and beyond into the Hebrew Scriptures, we learn that place is the land of Canaan; and much of the struggle these people of God experience is seeking and then trying to live faithfully toward Yahweh, their God, in that land amid the threats of invaders and rival gods.

Now Hebrews, which is a book of the New Testament, has taken some liberty with the stories of Abraham and his descendents and seems to have taken a more symbolic approach to their seeking a homeland. The writer of Hebrews understands Abraham and his descendents to have sought a better country, a heavenly city with foundations formed by God, the great architect and builder. The writer of Hebrews claims that Abraham sought to be in the place where God is, that the homeland he moved toward was a home in God, not necessarily a geographical location, and he was driven by faith. “Now faith is the assurance of

things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,” and by faith Abraham followed the promise of God, the promise of a homeland where God is the holder of the deed.

I don't know about you, but my back tends to stiffen a bit when I hear the word *faith*, particularly when it's phrased in such a way that indicates possession, like, “You just have to have faith that...” well, we can fill in the blank pretty easily. “You have to have faith that this is God's will.” “You just need a little faith that things will all turn out okay.” These well-intended statements can make faith sound like something you can possess, that it can somehow be obtained, all in a neat package found in aisle 12 at the grocery store, to be purchased, taken home, unwrapped, and poured into our internal faith reservoirs. Just be sure to put it on the shopping list next time. Or perhaps we envy the faith of other people. “Gosh, if I just had Grandma's faith, I know I could...” Again, we can fill in that blank. Faith can seem like that little paragraph in the will amid descriptions of the bone china set and the cabin on the lake. We'll inherit it. We just have to wait.

Or do we?

I suspect most of us really do recognize in some way or another that faith isn't something we possess, but rather something we do—an action, an attitude, a life-orientation—more so than just a feeling or belief. Sometimes, though, we get stuck at that seemingly giant belief speed bump on the road of life, and it can seem a painfully slow process to get over it, and perhaps we might just want to stop there because the view of life there doesn't seem that bad. But we don't. We do get over that speed bump, because we keep moving or someone helps us move along the way. That's faith: to trust, to make a choice, a decision to do something, to move forward toward something good and hopeful, to have courage, to risk even. Or, as Frederick Buechner puts it, “faith is less a position *on* than a movement *toward* [something], less a sure thing than a hunch.”¹

For Abraham, faith is ultimately living life in response to God's promises, and it's the trust that drives Abraham to leave his father's house and set out toward someplace else, something else, to which God was calling him, to something hoped for, something unseen but of which Abraham was convinced existed...a homeland with God.

And this faith makes him and Sarah and his descendents a little peculiar, a little strange.

The writer of Hebrews tells us that they never reached that homeland, but they did see it in the distance with their “eyes of faith”² and waved. They claimed their identity as one of stranger, of foreigner, as they lived. Now, doesn't that

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 173.

² Fred Craddock, *The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. XII* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 137.

seem peculiar, a bit odd, to consider oneself forever a stranger, a foreigner, throughout life? To never seek a permanent residence in the surrounding land and culture but rather to have the suitcases ready to pull out of the closet and an ear straining for the voice of God? Doesn't that seem a bit strange? Actually, no, it doesn't, not if the values, goals, relationships, and attitudes of the land in which a person lives just don't measure up to the promises of God.³ It isn't strange if faith, the "eye of [the] heart,"⁴ keeps a steady watch on the horizon for a glimpse of that homeland where God stands alert, watching for us, waving at us, calling us to keep going.

By faith, lots of people have lived this strange, peculiar way of life. Abraham and Sarah make the list; and if we were to read the verses around today's scripture passage, we'd find Noah and Isaac and Jacob and Joseph and Moses and Rahab also listed in this good company of the faithful and peculiar. Paul and the early disciples and Mary and Martha find their way into that life, too. I suspect Jesus might, just maybe, be counted among these homeland bound travelers, too. Wasn't he always talking about that Kingdom, that Realm of God? Sounds like the homeland to me.

By faith, lots of people have lived this strange, peculiar way of life that really seems to be at odds with what we know all too well of this world where power, privilege, and wealth seem more the standard than loving God and neighbor. But in loving God and neighbor, no matter how hard that may be to do, we can experience a portion of the pathway toward that homeland Abraham started out for so long ago...and it's by faith that we can keep going.

We get glimpses of the homeland from time to time. It happened most vividly for me that February afternoon 3½ years ago when I started my drive across the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge. To be clear, the San Francisco Bay Area, geographically-speaking, is not that homeland; but something of my life lived there, something of the community of faith I experienced there, pulled me more firmly on the path toward that homeland, pointed me toward God, more so than at any other point in my life up to that time. By faith, I had uprooted my professional life as a teacher and moved halfway across the country...alone. By faith, I had risked my comfort and entered into conversations with my classmates about racism and my white privilege. By faith, I had held out my tender soul to God and asked that God transform me and my life as I sought to journey along side my friends and classmates down the path of this peculiar way of life. And in doing so, I caught glimpses of the homeland. In living by faith, I saw the promises of God, and they gave me all the more reason to keep going.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark*.

We get glimpses of the homeland in God from time to time. It appears more clearly in the distance when the halls of justice in yet another state assuredly claim the civil right of same-sex couples to marry. We see it when the light of forgiveness is reflected toward us after we've said "I'm sorry" following a fight with a friend where we said some particularly hurtful things. And we catch a glimpse of it right here, at this Table, where Christ is our host and all who seek their homeland in God are welcomed, a place for each and every person.

It's also here at the Table that we can find the strength, the nourishment, the vision to live this peculiar way of life. By faith, let us move forward, through the ages, toward our home in God. Thanks be to God. Amen.
