

Stewardship Series: Faith in Action
Part I: A Step of Faith
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Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. . . . By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed, and went, even though he did not know where he was going. 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. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

-- Hebrews 11:1-2, 8-10, NIV

Our passage from the book of Hebrews talks about Abraham. It says that “by faith Abraham” went to the place he was called by God to go *even though he did not know where he was going*. It reminds me of another story I heard about a husband and wife who were heading out on a trip. They were in the car and they had just merged on to the freeway. The husband was driving. They drove for a while and the wife wasn’t really paying attention to where they were going. At one point she began looking around. She then turned to her husband and said, “We’re lost, aren’t we? You have no idea where we are going, do you? Pull over the car!” So, the husband pulled over and began slowing down on the side of the road. They were rolling to a stop when the wife was about to let him have it some more, but the husband said, “Stop! I know what you are going to say. You are right. We are lost. But we are making *great* time!”

I wonder, when Abraham was making that journey to the promised land to which God had told him to go, if Abraham ever felt like he really did *not* know where he was going. When it comes to living our lives *by faith*, it sometimes feels that way, doesn’t it? In fact, it is arguably one definition of faith – something we “step out in” as in *stepping out in faith* -- trusting that God is somehow in charge and knows where we are going, even if we do not. *We act by faith*. In my Bible, the heading above this eleventh chapter in Hebrews calls this section “Faith in Action.” We’ve chosen those words to be our theme for our stewardship season -- *faith in action*.

My sense is that this pandemic has caused many of us to take life more seriously, not only because this virus is deadly serious, but when we face the possibility of sickness, death, economic setbacks, and the challenges of social distancing -- it pushes us to consider the deeper questions of life. And when those questions are about our very existence, we may be led to think about God and faith -- which makes faith something we consider taking more seriously. So, looking at a whole chapter in the Bible that talks about faith and those whom the writer of Hebrews seems to hold up as examples of living “by faith” make sense for us to do.

This morning we only read about Abraham, but I encourage you to find time later to read the whole chapter and look at all of the names listed here. They’re all characters from our Old Testament, some of them well known, others not so much. But the New Testament writer of the book of Hebrews chooses them as examples for us to remember as those who lived by faith. The fascinating thing is that they are a less-than-perfect group of individuals. Some of them may have

done great things, but on this list are murderers, liars, swindlers, adulterers, and even a prostitute. Those are the best examples the writer of Hebrews could come up with? Apparently so. They were by no means perfect, and yet at the end of this eleventh chapter, the writer of Hebrews describes their perfection in this way: “These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.” (Hebrews 11:39-40, NIV) Perfection was not something each of them had achieved. In this case, perfection seems to describe something God is doing in them and all of us “together” so that we can be a part of God’s ultimate goal for the world -- which is what the Greek word for “perfect” means in this context -- the completed final goal or destination for everything and everyone.

When it comes to faith -- *having* faith and *living by* faith -- I take great encouragement that we don’t have to be perfect in order to live by faith and be a part of God’s work in the world. Faith is not something like willpower that we have to generate. It’s not something that “you gotta have” as pop singer George Michael sang in his song called “Faith.” It is not wishful thinking or blind optimism – at least for the Christian. No, faith begins with and is a gift from God. It is like a seed planted within us through God’s grace that can grow if we choose to act on that gift of faith and put our faith in action. Faith is not simply what we believe, nor is it merely the teachings of the church. Neither is it what we turn to when we’ve run out of all other options to do things our way. It is a basic trust in God. It is a trust that leads us to put our faith in action often by taking a step of faith -- sometimes one step at a time.

A while back, I pastored a church in Staunton, Virginia. Staunton is near Charlottesville, where I went to college and where I met my wife Pam. Pam worked as a news anchor at the TV station in Charlottesville, so whenever we drove there from Staunton, we had to drive over Afton Mountain. The road wound up and through a pass in the Blue Ridge Mountains. When it was cloudy, the fog on Afton Mountain could get very thick. They actually put runway lights in the road because of the limited visibility. Occasionally there were multi-car accidents.

I think faith is often like following the next light through a dense fog. It is a journey of trust. I tried to express this in a poem I wrote years ago when I lived there called “Crossing Afton Mountain.”

I move up the gradual incline
through fog thicker than sunlight
amber runway lights embedded in concrete
lead me deeper into the fog.

It is a faith journey of sorts.

One light at a time,
trusting the road
and the road-maker
leading me on.

God rarely shows us the whole path of our lives before us. More often, it is just one light at a time. Our friends in 12-step programs have picked up on this wisdom when they talk about taking one day at a time while trusting God -- or as they say, one's "higher power."

And yet, following those lights "by faith" is rarely easy, especially when it gets dark. During such times as this pandemic, it feels like darkness. We often wonder which way to go and what to do next. Apollo 13 astronaut James Lovell, whose story was told in one of my favorite movies of the same name starring Tom Hanks, once talked about an experience that may have helped to prepare him for the challenges of his near-tragic space flight. He said it occurred in the 1950s in the Sea of Japan when he was out flying a fighter jet over the ocean. It was at night and he was supposed to land on an aircraft carrier, but he could not find its signal and he was lost. He was running low on fuel -- when all of his electronic lights shorted out in his cockpit and everything went dark! But, it was only then, when all was dark, that he looked down at the surface of the ocean and saw something -- he saw the glowing, luminescent algae that had been churned up by the propellers of the aircraft carrier. And it formed a trail of light that led him to the aircraft carrier so he could land safely. But he would never have found that trail had his cockpit lights not gone out. Sometimes it is only in the darkest moments of life that we can finally see the faint trail of God's light that will lead us by faith to where we need to be.

What does all of this have to do with stewardship and giving? I think it has everything to do with giving because giving, especially giving after making a pledge of what we plan to give in the coming year -- giving is an act of faith. *Giving is faith in action*. Why do we give? Because God tells us we need to join in what God is doing in this world by giving of what we call in the church our "time, talents, and treasure." It means we give of our actual *time* -- which some say may be the most precious thing we normally have to share. *Talents* means we share our gifts -- what we are good at doing -- to help in God's work in our world. And *treasure* has to do with our financial resources. As Christians, we believe that all of these and the capacity to develop them, all of these are first given to us by God.

We call it *stewardship* because a steward is not someone who owns something, but someone who has been put in charge of using it well. When we really grasp that all we have and all that we are begins ultimately with God, it will transform how we view our giving in all areas of life. It is *not* how much do I want to give of *my* time, talent, and treasure -- but what is God calling me to give in each of those areas. When we trust God in faith and take the step of faith to give what God calls us to give, we enter into God's work in the world. Giving then becomes faith in action, which is much more than simply what we say we believe. In the book of James, the writer puts it more bluntly saying "Faith without works is dead." (James 2:26)

I have come to believe that it is almost impossible for us to attain a mature Christian faith in this life without learning to trust God and give generously in all three areas -- time, talent, and treasure. My guess is that most of us are pretty good with one of these three. Some of us are pretty good with two. But probably for each one of us, we all struggle with one of the three -- which makes it an area of spiritual growth and a spiritual growing edge. We each need to "lean into" the area where we feel most challenged in order to grow spiritually.

In the same way, the writer of Hebrews invites us to *remember* these imperfect persons who lived by faith and were used by God to do very important things, we also *remember* what God has done in the life of this church. For twenty-five years, God has blessed our church, and throughout that time we have given back, putting our *faith in action*. That is great! Before this pandemic hit, we were putting our faith in action by touching 2,300 lives weekly during the school year with the ministries and mission of our church on this campus. That was about ten times the number of folks attending worship. It is how we Give, Go and Live. We are able to do that by putting our faith in action through our giving.

Beginning today, we are asking each one of us to prayerfully discern how God is calling us to support God's work through Johns Creek Presbyterian Church in the coming year. As much as any year since I have been here, we need folks to step up in faith, to take the step of faith, trusting that God will see us through and enable us to survive this pandemic challenge so we can move forward in a post-pandemic world, adapting what we have learned in the hope that we can return to touching lives on the scale we were doing prior to this pandemic.

You can make your pledge any time using either the QR code on your bulletin or pledge card, going to our church website or app, mailing in your card, dropping it in the Welcome Center drop box, or you can place it in the offering plate at the end of Drive-In Worship.

A while back, you may remember the news story of someone who put her faith in action named Antoinette Tuff. You probably heard the story at the time as it unfolded about a school hostage situation. Many of us feared the worst -- that we would have another school shooting in our very midst -- but it did not turn out that way -- thanks be to God! A young man with the gun who went to the school was mentally ill and had gone off his medication. Antoinette Tuff was the bookkeeper working in the school office that day who just happened to be filling in. When confronted with the young man, she calmly talked the young man out of hurting anyone. She told the young man that she loved him and that there was a way out of this. The young man told her earlier that he had expected to die that day. She shared of her own struggles with her husband of 33 years leaving her. She even said that she had thought about suicide herself with the demands of taking care of her special-needs son. She later told reporters that she was able to stay calm because of what she had recently learned from her pastor at her church. She said:

“My pastor, he just started this teaching on anchoring, and how you anchor yourself in the Lord,” she said. “I just sat there and started praying. I just remembered the teaching and how he taught us (church members) how to counsel people when they're bereaving and all that. I realized at that time that it was bigger than me,” she added. “He was really a hurting young man, so I just started praying for him. [I] just started talking to him and allowing him to know some of my life stories and what was going on with me, and that it was going to be OK and he could just give himself up.”

Antoinette Tuff had no idea that day how God would call her to put her faith in action, or that she would save the lives of countless children and teachers -- and even talk a disturbed young man into getting the help he needed rather than hurting others and killing himself.

Some of you may wonder why I chose that rather dark story to talk about during stewardship season. I thought about how Antoinette learned about how to talk to someone in church, and I

thought about our Stephen Ministers who we train who might help someone in that way. And I thought about that young man, and it reminded me of all we do with youth ministry and children's ministry and our scout troops – all of which we support with our giving to help our young people make it in life.

Friends, I believe God calls each one of us in our own way to put our faith in action -- giving what we have to offer and trusting God to take care of the rest. Know that whatever God calls you to do, wherever God calls you to go, God will give you what you need to get where you need to go – to take the next step of faith and put your faith in action. So friends, how is God calling you to put your faith in action today?

In the strong name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.