

I'm But a Stranger Here

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16 (NIV)

¹ Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. ² This is what the ancients were commended for. ³ By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible. ⁸ 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. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹ And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise. ¹² And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore. ¹³ All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. ¹⁴ People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

Show of hands. (And I'm not going to use this to shame anyone – just to make a point.) How many of you are native Utahns? How many of you native Utahns live in the same house in the same neighborhood you grew up in? How many of you have moved to Utah?

Most, if not all of us, have made a move at some point in our lives. That meant a new house, a new job, a new school, new friends, difference in proximity to family, and more. Many of you being military have lived overseas, been deployed, or at least TDY. After making that move, you knew what it was to be a stranger and a foreigner. Things were different. You had to navigate around a part of the world that is new to you. Maybe some of the rules and laws were different. Maybe words and phrases were new to you or the entire language was not your language and you didn't know what people were saying or were confused by the local dialect. You didn't blend right in. You felt like a tourist, looking around to figure out where stuff is whether it's street signs or aisles in a grocery store. Your clothes may have stood out from the rest, making you even that much more noticeable as the new kid. Especially at first, but maybe even still to today, you felt out of place. You didn't feel like you belong. You hoped that this is just temporary and wonder if you could just go back home where you don't stand out, where you aren't different. We all want to feel at home.

Abraham felt this. God called him to leave his homeland - his father, his other relatives, the place he knew and was familiar with - to go to a place that God would show him. Abraham didn't have Google Maps to show him the way, to scout out what's in the area. He was simply told to go with the promise that he would one day inherit the land that God placed him in. Abraham amazingly obeyed, packed everything up, and went. For the next 100 years leading up to his death, he tented, as did his son Isaac, and Isaac's son Jacob. They lived in temporary homes, constantly being reminded that they were strangers, foreigners without a permanent home.

How many times do you think Abraham heard words and phrases that he didn't understand? How many miscommunications did he have with the locals because he spoke a different language? How many cultural things were completely foreign to him and made him feel so lost and out of place with the people around him? How many times did he think that he should just pack up everything and go back home by his father? He was a stranger there. He longed for something else, something solid. "He was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God." (verse 10) He longed for a permanent home. Don't we as well?

Do you feel like a foreigner and a stranger right now? Is Utah just not home, no matter how little or how long you have lived here? Is a reoccurring thought you have one that says you will never fit in, that this place will never be your home? Is this exacerbated by the fact that your parents, your kids, or your grandkids do not live here? Are these thoughts driving you to the point of despair, that you simply will never fit in anywhere again and so you feel isolated and alone?

To an extent, we should all have this feeling of being a stranger, a foreigner. God has said of us that we are not of the world, but we are in the world. We are not of the world because he has called us to belong to him. He did this in our baptisms, when he put his name on us, when he washed away all our sins and made us new as he clothed us with Christ and his perfection. He did this when he called us to faith in him, to belong to him because he ransomed us away from sin, death, and the power of the devil. God called us to belong to him, not to the world. This means that all of us as Christians are strangers and foreigners here because we are not of the world, but of God.

So, how do we deal with this disorientating and, frankly, upsetting feeling that we don't belong? This is what we mean when we say that the Christian lives by faith. "Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see." (verse 1) We live by trusting in something that we can't see. That's faith.

Living by faith raises challenges for us because we like to have visual confirmation, something tangible to us to serve as proof, to place our trust in. I say I grew up in Wisconsin. You say, "Prove it." I show you a birth certificate that says I was born in Fort Atkinson, WI. You say, "That looks fake." I introduce you to my mother who testifies that she did in fact give birth to me in Wisconsin. You say, "She's lying. You probably paid her to say it." I could take you to my hometown, show you around, share my memories of these places with you, show you the house I grew up in. You say, "You're making all that up. You're just good at spinning tales." My point is that I can show you things to prove to you that what I say is true, but you were not there to witness the event. You can accept or reject what I'm saying, but that doesn't change the truth. What you really want to get down into is: Do you have good reason to either accept or reject what I am saying? Am I worthy of your trust?

Consider Abraham again. God said that he would inherit this land that he was tenting in, that he was a foreigner in. Abraham died without ever seeing that happen. In fact, that wouldn't happen for about 600 years after his life. God told Abraham that he would have descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky, the sands of the seashore. By the time he died, Abraham had a total of eight sons – Isaac, from his wife Sarah; Ishmael, from Sarah's maidservant Hagar; and six more sons from his second wife, Keturah, whom he married after Sarah had died. Abraham could count more than eight stars and eight grains of sand on the beach before he died.

Abraham died without seeing these things. Because Abraham did not see these things, had God lied? Had he given Abraham false promises and false hope? We know from history that the Lord did make Abraham's descendants into multiple nations, including the descendants of Isaac and Jacob who carried with them the promise of the Savior. You read those genealogies in the Bible and you wonder what's up with all these names. "And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore." (verse 12) We know that those descended from Isaac and Jacob did take over that promised land under the leadership of Joshua. These events were recorded so that you and I know that God did in fact keep his promise to Abraham, as God always does.

God has never once failed to keep his Word. Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob knew this. So, when God promised something to them that they didn't see, they took it on faith. They believed without seeing. "All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth." (verse 13) These are the facts of the matter which prove that God is worthy of your trust. When he says something, even though we may never see it or hold it in our hands this side of heaven, his Word is good. He will come through on what he promised because he always has. This is why we live by faith in him and take him at his Word.

Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob knew that they were strangers here, foreigners, not just because they lived away from the place they grew up, but because they didn't belong to the world. They knew that they belonged to God. They admitted that they were strangers and foreigners here because "people who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own." (verse 14) They could have gone back to where they grew up, but they lived by faith. They trusted God to come through on his promises. They banked on God keeping his Word. "They were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them." (verse 18) They believed that God would come through for them and save them. Their home was with God.

Utah may or may not feel like home to you, but as a follower of Christ, our home is not the dirt of this earth. Our home is with God. He has adopted us into his family. He has taken away our sins. He has given us belonging with him. He has prepared a place for you and me with him – an eternal home. God is not ashamed of you if you stand out, being different from everyone else. God has prepared for you a city. With a big ol' smile on his face, he looks forward to the day when you join him there. We believe this to be true because we are confident in the one who made the promises, not because we have held these things in our hands, but because his Word is true.

When my family was back in Wisconsin this past July, I noticed a new decoration in my in-law's house. It read, "The Good Ol' Days Are Still to Come." I don't know who first started saying this, but this is what a Christian believes. No matter how fond you are of past memories and past events and hometowns, the best is still to come because we have a home, a permanent city, with God. We take this promise on faith, not on sight, because the one who promises these things has always proven trustworthy. This is why we sing proudly, sweetly, "I'm but a stranger here; heaven is my home." We may be strangers here, but we have a home and are at home with God. Amen.