

Remembering the Future

Sunday, August 8, 2010

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

11:1-3: Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

11:8-16: By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old--and Sarah herself was barren--because he considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, "as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore." All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

The word "faith" appears to be the subject of the Hebrews lesson this morning! The word appears *eight* times in this selection of verses from chapter 11, and then appears (as I count) an additional *seventeen* times in the remainder of the chapter. Yet the sense I get from the lesson today is that nowhere are we told *what* to believe. Quite the contrary. We are being invited to an adventure of *how to be* in the world. We are invited to be *strangers and sojourners* who know that our homeland is somewhere else. Not exactly tourists in this world, more like guests whose associations and dreams and hopes belong in another dimension. Mostly we are invited to live without fear, and living without fear, to become peaceful and just and generous while we are here.

Although the lesson looks *back* to Abraham who set out on a life-changing journey on a simple promise from God, we are invited to look *forward*. There is a "better country," a "city whose foundations are built by God," a "heavenly place" ahead of us. This place is our destiny. There *is* no reason to be afraid! Although we are not *there* yet, think of it this way. We carry a shipping label inside us, filled out and paid for. When we are ready to go home,

all somebody has to do is turn us inside out so the label shows and pop us into the mail. No fuss, no bother!

So we are invited to remember this future. We *already have* the “assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Therefore – and this is a *very big* therefore – we can connect the dots back from our destiny to the lives we live right now. There is no reason we cannot begin rolling out our destiny right now!

Got peace? *Actually, I do!*

Got justice? *I'm on it!*

Got generosity? *Not a problem!*

So what's preventing us from connecting the dots? My guess is that there is a voice inside each one of us that says: *The promise is not for you. Nice idea. But not for you!* I don't know exactly where the voice comes from. Psychologists will point to childhood fears. Sociologists will indicate our socio-economic origins. Educators will look into our self-esteem issues. Some Christians will tell you it's the devil for sure! I don't really know. But I do know that some voice bound to nag at us and make us afraid is built into our experience of this world. And I can see that the Book of Hebrews is going right after that voice to tell that voice it's a liar!

Listen! Remember who you are! You are Jesus' people! And Jesus already connected the dots for you! There is nothing you can fear in this world that he did not face. There is nothing in this world to overcome that he did not overcome. He knew where he was going and therefore what he was here for – and the result was that he was joyfully willing to be here. He may have been the first, but you are right on his heels, on the Way, and in his heart. This is the faith! *You are as he is!* You sometimes *assume* that *power* – the power to live freely and joyfully – is given or conceded by the world! Nonsense! There is only one source for freedom and joy – it does not come from this world -- but it is yours for the claiming!

Will a loving God deny you if you ask to remember who you are?

There's a wonderful movie about remembering and claiming. I don't know how many of you have seen it. I saw it recently on Netflix. The movie is called *The Whale Rider*. It's the story of a girl who is the last in a long line of chiefs among the Maori people in a seacoast village in New Zealand. Once, long ago, an ancestor named Paekia, the Whale Rider, brought the people across the ocean on the back of a whale to this homeland. In modern times, however, the people are dwindling and drifting into hopelessness and the ancient songs are losing their power. So a girl is born to the chief's clan and ironically given the name Paekia by her father, a father who rejects the whole clan system and disappears to live another life far away.

This newest Paekia, even at twelve years old, knows that the ancient songs live in her. But she is told that as a female she can never be chief – or Whale Rider. Moreover, she is rejected and blamed by her grandfather, the current chief, who longs to recover the old ways and revive his people. He cannot see who Paekia truly is. So Paekia lives in two worlds: the one she knows inside herself and the one outside that cannot accept her. The marvelous thing about Paekia is that she keeps insisting that the two worlds cannot be incompatible – they simply must be reimagined.

So one day she remembers what her ancestor Paekia did in a time of crisis. She sings a song to the whales, asking them to come revive the people once again. That night, the whales do come, with disastrous results. A whole pod of whales led by a huge old male beach themselves on the very spot where, centuries ago, the first Paekia had ridden a whale ashore. That night on the beach the whales begin to die.

Now the story we tell ourselves stops here. The songs have lost their power to bring life. The stories fade. The legends die. The people are left with irreconcilable breaks between past and future, between generations, between men and women, between oppressors and victims, between natives and immigrants, between living and dying. There appears to be no

way out! People long for what used to be or look angrily at what should be and isn't, casting around for someone to blame!

Paekia realizes she must do the forbidden. She must *become* the Whale Rider and cease waiting for someone else to give her permission! So she clammers up the back of the huge old male dying on the beach and begins to sing to him. Gradually, as the tide flows back in, the whale is able to lift and move and then head back out to open water – with the Whale Rider on his back.

No one wants to die. But in truth we die a little at a time when we accept the world's verdict that we are powerless and joyless. On the contrary! We are built – as Jesus says in John's gospel! – to *have life and that abundantly* even though we die! We are meant to be willing and joyful and adventurous. We are meant to remember our homeland, a city built by God, a destiny shimmering with peace. And from that place we are meant to connect the dots back to where we are and so live as guests who bring other habits, gifts and manners than those that tear our world apart.

Paekia doesn't die. She nearly drowns as the old whale dives deep. But she lets go and a villager fishes her from water. Days later, she wakes up in the hospital. Now she *knows* she is the Whale Rider, and as the Whale Rider recovers, the heart of the people begins to wake up.

Those who *wake up* from the sleep of "what is" claim a different homeland. They are no longer afraid of living or dying. They realize they are strangers and sojourners in this land. And they are not alone. There is around us, Hebrews says, "a whole cloud of witnesses" who have come before us to show us the way. In them we know that the world must admit its powerlessness to stop the people of God!

This, then, is the faith. We do not belong here. But we live here as ones whose destiny is assured. Therefore we proclaim the truth that *we make things that are seen from things of God that are invisible!*

This is our promise! We stand now in what is to come!

Amen