

“Tent Dreams”

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A Sermon for Every Sunday
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Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16b

Some years ago, I spent a week in Colorado at a Presbyterian youth conference. It was an amazing week, and if you’ve ever been to one of these events, or worked at one, or sent your child on one, or happened to be in the vicinity of twelve hundred youth worshipping full throttle and top decibel, you know what I mean. Youth conferences are like retreats; you just leave it all behind. And if you’re in Colorado, which we were, then you *have* to worship outside, under the stars, every night (it’s required), with a galaxy of sacred space above you and the twelve hundred teenagers around you. A person can’t help but think outside the box, on a night like that.

At this conference, the musician David Bailey played for one of the worship services. Some of you may have known David. He was a singer-songwriter who spent fourteen years in a fierce battle with cancer and wrote about it: what it was like to be a twenty-something person of faith, married with two children, and quite possibly dying. He played for a lot of youth conferences because he was so inspiring. David told us, that night in Colorado, that when he was first diagnosed, he used to wake up in the morning thinking, “Why me?” But then one day he woke up and said, “Okay, God: what now?” And it changed his life. It changed ours too. We woke up every morning for the rest of that conference, and the first thing we said to God and one another was, “Okay: what now?”

Before the pandemic, I was reading quite a few articles about the church that sounded a lot like, “Why me?” You know the ones that quote the statistics about how the Church is in decline, the seminaries are in decline, no one goes to church or is interested in organized religion when they could go to brunch instead, and if we keep going at this rate, the Church as we know it will die. Those writers sound like they wake up every morning thinking, “Why me?” But one of the amazing things about these past two years is that not once, *not once*, have I read an article like that or heard any churchperson saying, “Why me?” It’s like we all spent the pandemic at a youth conference in Colorado. Maybe the things we’ve had to do this year, just to survive, have put us in a “What now?” frame of mind. Easter services in the parking lot, for example: that’s outside the box. And I like *outside the box* worship better than *remote* worship, because it hasn’t been remote, not once: we’ve done everything we could think of, to stay connected and together. I bet your congregation has some stories like that. Outside the box, together. And overhead, a galaxy of sacred space, waiting for us to dream it.

Scripture is filled with people like this. Abraham, for instance: he’s a “What now?” kind of guy. He and Sarah are also excellent examples of what the world thinks “in decline” looks like: two octogenarians, without a biological hope of birthing a line of descendants. If these two with their statistics were all you had to work with, you’d probably wake up

saying, “Why me?” and some of us would write articles. It’s not just outside the box for God to pick Abraham and Sarah as partners in the covenant; it’s extreme sports. High risk, high danger, big thrills, really stupid. But frankly, it’s a pattern we’ll see again and again in the Bible. Who does God pick to be the greatest king Israel ever had? A teen-aged shepherd boy with a slingshot who can sing. Who does God pick to be the Mother of Jesus? A small-town teen-aged girl with a fiancé and a lot of explaining to do. Extreme sports. Total messing around with our heads and our bodies and our statistics and probability. And I guess God thinks that’s important: to keep messing with us. It keeps us on our toes. It keeps us interested: *What now, God? What could you possibly think of now?!* It keeps us from getting too settled and professional and...grown up about our faith—no matter how old we are. You might even say that when God messes with us, it keeps things strange: whenever we’re tempted to feel a little too much at home in this world, God reminds us that we don’t own the place; we’re just camping out on our way through.

I think this is what’s going on in this passage from Hebrews. The author is trying to tell us what real faith looks like. Yes, the author says, it was really something that old Abraham and Sarah had faith in God’s strange promises when she was barren, and he was as good as dead. Those two actually believed that God could pull a fast one with the childbirth statistics, and God did, and that’s great. But the *really* great thing is that Abraham and Sarah were willing to believe all this from a tent. The *really* great thing is that they were willing to basically camp out for decades, knowing that someday, God would design and build a city with foundations, but they wouldn’t ever see it; someday, God would raise up descendants as numerous as the stars, but they wouldn’t ever meet them. That’s real faith, the author says. Seeing God’s promises from a distance, and not breaking camp. Living like a stranger on this earth and dreaming from inside your tent.

Now, that’s not a definition that will immediately appeal to everyone. When my children were young, every summer our family did some kind of outdoor adventure. Every year I would think, there are two kinds of people on this earth: people who like to camp, and people who don’t and hope to be good sports. My husband and two sons are definitely in the first category; they are passionate about camping. I’m not. I can backpack, I can cook over a camp stove, I can put up a tent and I can sleep in it, and even enjoy it, mostly, but *given a choice*, it’s not what I would choose to do for decades.

But here’s what I’ve noticed. When you’re camping, and sleeping in a tent, you dream differently. You actually *think* differently. No alarm systems, no locks, no storm windows, no broken dishwashers; you just zip up the flap and dream about the night sky, and how big it is, and how small you are. In the morning, maybe you move. And it does something to you, that transience; you remember that this earth doesn’t belong to us, and we aren’t in control, and maybe getting in touch with God’s dreams is more important than fulfilling our own. Maybe seeing God’s vision, and greeting it from distance, is better than finishing any of our own worthy projects, because real faith, this bible passage tells us, is like living and dreaming in a tent. Worshiping...outside. With a galaxy of sacred space above us, and a church full of hope around us, and no boxes anywhere.

And here's the gift I think you can keep from this Hebrews text. It's the gift of a tent: Abraham and Sarah's tent. It's the gift of seeing that real faith has something to do with institutions and installations and buildings and a sure foundation, but that *Jesus* is the real foundation; Jesus is the head and cornerstone; and if we put up any buildings at all, they're just tents. If we worship in sanctuaries or behind our screens, *they're* just tents. This, *all* of this, is God's world, and we're just camping on the way through. God builds what will last, and we greet it from a distance.

Here's my prayer for you, this day. My prayer is that you will give thanks for that galaxy of sacred space above us, and then, dear saints, wherever you are—do what you already know how to do. Roll up your sleeves, pick up your backpacks, and follow Jesus into the streets of your town, the highways and byways where despair lives, the poor and the hungry cry out, and people are waiting to hear good news. Pitch your tent where there are strangers to welcome, prisoners to visit, sick ones to care for and mourning ones to comfort, and children and youth to teach about what is true and real and sacred. Let's all pick ourselves up after these wretched two years, and give thanks for what we've learned, outside the box: that we aren't just good campers. We were born for it. So what now, God? What could you possibly think of now?!? What are you going to show us in the night sky? Where should we camp tonight?

Amen.

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Hebrews 11

1 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen....

8 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. 9 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. 10 For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. 11 By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered the one faithful who had promised.

12 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.”

13 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, 14 for people who speak this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. 15 If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 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, God has prepared for a city for them.