

O God, we listen for Your Word as those lost in the wilderness listen for the sound of water. Open our hearts, that we may rejoice to receive Your promises. Teach us to trust, that all our living might testify to Your mighty power to save. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Every election season, we hear about famous political leaders whose track records serve as the pedigree for contemporary policy approaches. Candidates for public office regularly invoke heroes¹ of yore whose examples are supposed to authorize whatever positions are currently being advocated. Liberal Democrats reach predictably for the example of John F. Kennedy; Republicans are fond of citing Ronald Reagan as their authorizing hero. Lately in Republican discourse, it's all "Abraham Lincoln"—you can't have one of the political commentary shows on for five minutes without hearing someone mention "the party of Lincoln."²

To understand who we are in community, we look to valiant figures and the decisions they made that shaped the course of history. We don't tend to focus on their struggles and missteps, or the lack of clarity that may have bedeviled them—those times when an admired leader didn't know what to do or blundered through a crisis. In the Western cultural imagination, "history" seems to mean the vast sweep of grandiose events enacted effectively on a global stage. When marginalized groups object to official narratives, it's sometimes called "alternative history," as if the dominant story were the real, objective history and those who say

it's distorted their truth or silenced their voices are doing something radical by telling the story differently.

Well, in these days of domineering rhetoric and an unremitting focus on strategies of political control, we may be refreshed by the Letter to the Hebrews. Because this is *alternative* history.

Hebrews is not a narrative of kings and empires. Our lesson this morning doesn't focus on international trade alliances, wars, or the monumental edifices of exploitation built by those with social and political capital. No, Hebrews shows us the vast sweep of history through a *spiritual* lens. For Hebrews, what has mattered since the dawn of time are the trust and endurance shown by simple folks—believers whose resilience keeps them going though they glimpse only from a distance³ what God is working in their lives.

Modern political history has trained our gaze on the glittering retinues of emperors. We are transfixed by the huge armies marching before them and the heaps of rubble left behind them. Hebrews 11 invites us to see history in a different way: as spiritual microhistory.⁴ We watch quietly as believers make modest offerings of grain and vegetables they grew themselves; we listen as they bow their heads in prayer. Far from trumpeting the displays of power that dominate global politics, the spiritual microhistory in Hebrews foregrounds the tenacity⁵ of believers who trust God in times—even lifetimes—of uncertainty. *These are they* who have places of honor in

the pantheon of Hebrews 11. *These* are our ancestors in that great “cloud of witnesses”⁶ who testify to faith in the grace of God!

“*By faith* Abraham ... set out, not knowing where he was going.” Trusting God can mean setting off for unknown territory. You may know something about that in your own life.

“*By faith* [Abraham] stayed for a time in” Canaan, “the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents.” Trusting God can mean remaining a sojourner in territory that is unfamiliar, waiting to see what God will do. You may know about that too.

“*By faith* he received [the] power of procreation, even though he was too old,”⁷ and “descendants were born, as many as the stars of heaven and the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.” Trusting God means receiving the gifts God gives you even when they are completely unexpected—allowing God to bring forth fruitfulness from your joys and despairs, your successes and struggles and failures. In this gifted and faithful congregation, so passionate for justice and so loving, I *know* you know about that.

Hebrews traces for us the quiet trust of ancestors who created the community of faith gradually throughout their lives, moment by moment, in times of risk and challenge, by remaining resilient and seeking the purposes of God. From quiet

moments of prayer and spiritual wrestling and fragile obedience has sprung a community richer in giftedness and love of holiness than Abraham could ever have imagined. His lineage grounds the beautiful tradition of Judaism and, through the grace of God, has become a source of blessing for “all the families of the earth.”⁸

Family. A couple of weeks ago, a packet arrived in our mailbox from Tulsa, Oklahoma. It was from my Uncle John. He had sent documentation of the Sharp family line going back to the 18th century. I’ve been astonished to learn that we have in our lineage a number of devout Baptists—yes! I had thought it was Episcopalians all the way back—including a Baptist deacon who was a founding trustee of Baylor University and a circuit-riding Baptist minister who pastored rural churches in Texas for three decades. We are related, by an officially documented bloodline, to Nathanael Greene, a Major General under George Washington during the Revolutionary War. We are also apparently related to Andrew Jackson, the seventh president of the United States.⁹

Ancestry seems to promise that mysteries long-hidden will be revealed, doesn’t it? I have dear friends who cannot tear themselves away from Ancestry.com, and you’ve doubtless seen the ads on TV for those ancestry DNA kits, where someone finds out they are 20% Cherokee or the like. It’s fascinating stuff. I had no idea my father’s family lived for generations in Tennessee and Texas. No one had ever told me that anyone in my family prior to me had been ordained in the Christian ministry. This whole thing entralls—because of the lure of historical power, but I

suspect also because of the undeniable fragility and conflict of it. Nathanael Greene was a Quaker, but also a brilliant military tactician; I am a pacifist, so how do I reconcile the fact that he was responsible for many, many deaths? Andrew Jackson: president, sure, but inexcusably cruel to Native Americans. The forced migrations that happened due to the Indian Removal Act Jackson signed into law in 1830 caused terrible suffering and the deaths of some 10,000 Native persons. Even my Baptist relations are cause for consternation as well as joy. I rejoice in their commitment to Jesus Christ and their service to His Church, yet they ministered in the very conservative Southern Baptist Convention. I looked up one of the churches, Elmont Baptist in Van Alstyne, Texas. To this day it staunchly opposes women in the pastorate and argues that homosexuality is immoral.

Our political history—our *ancestry*—is inevitably flawed, fragile, and contested. Thank God for the Letter to the Hebrews, which helps us remember that our shared history, as Christians, is all about the promises of God!¹⁰

Abraham set out for the unknown: *evidence*¹¹ that faith can sustain us as we move through uncharted terrain toward what God is preparing for us.

That's a promise.

Abraham stayed in tents, choosing a liminal and insecure existence in order to remain obedient: *evidence* that we can flourish on the margins as God prepares a place for us.

That's a promise.

Abraham received power for procreation decades after he had lost all hope: *evidence* that absolutely nothing is impossible for God.¹²

That's a promise.

The history that *counts* is the history of the promises of our Lord,

the One who overcomes every obstacle,

who creates springs of water in every desert,¹³

who heals every infirmity and brings forth justice;

the One who “sustains all things by his powerful word,”¹⁴

a light to every nation and the Author of our salvation:

Jesus Christ, to whom be all honor, glory, and praise, now and forever. Amen.

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Proper 14C

Isaiah 1:1, 10–20; Psalm 50:1–8, 22–23; Hebrews 11:1–3, 8–16; Luke 12:32–40

Preached at St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, Connecticut

¹ I have not seen women politicians invoked as valiant figures with any frequency in U.S. public conversations in my lifetime, so, to my regret as a feminist, I cannot add “and heroines” here. I cheerfully acknowledge that female civil rights activists and educators do get occasional mention in public discourse.

² One of the more well-worn quotes from the 20th century is John F. Kennedy’s “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country,” from Kennedy’s inaugural address as 35th president of the United States on 20 January 1961. JFK’s emphasis on resilience and sacrifice for the common good came at a time when the U.S. was in the grip of the Cold War, Jim Crow laws and virulent racism were continuing to deform many lives in the Deep South and elsewhere, and poverty, especially in rural areas, had reached catastrophic levels, with some estimating that over 20% of the U.S. population lived below the poverty line.

³ Hebrews 11:13: “All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them.”

⁴ “Microhistory,” a scholarly approach plied for several decades now, reconfigures the focus of historical analysis, moving away from monumental events and well-known leaders to perform fine-grained analysis on a subject of smaller scope. Microhistorians might study a slice of everyday life in a particular time and place, or a discrete incident with wider ramifications that are not usually appreciated, or illustrative elements in the life of an individual who has not traditionally been deemed significant. The aim is to utilize case studies to illuminate ways in which a fuller understanding of events in popular culture and marginalized cultural spaces, decisions of local autonomous actors, and details of daily practice can enrich, complicate, or even subvert official historical narratives.

⁵ Michael R. Cosby writes of the paragons named in Hebrews 11, “The examples are carefully selected and worded to portray these men and women of the past as those who rejected earthly success and security and demonstrated by their lives a tenacious belief in the truth of God’s promise of heavenly reward” (“The Rhetorical Composition of Hebrews 11,” *JBL* 107 [1998]: 257–273, at 260).

⁶ Hebrews 12:1.

⁷ The Greek syntax of that clause in Heb 11:11 in some ancient manuscripts reads, “By faith Sarah herself, though barren, received power to conceive, even though she was too old.” Some Bible translations, including the Spanish Reina-Valera Update (1995) and the Zürcher Bibel (2007), do go that route. But stories in Genesis emphasize as barriers to fulfillment of the promise Sarah’s *barrenness* (Gen 11:30, 16:1) and *Abraham’s* old age (Gen 17:1), though Gen 18:11–15 (about both being old) might be mustered in favor of altering the translation. The Hebrews 11 list does not otherwise change its subject focus in the middle of a point being made about

one of the ancient worthies. Harold Attridge examines possibilities for various construals of the procreation idiom with Sarah as subject. He dismisses them as unlikely, concluding that a minor emendation—adding an iota subscript to put the pronominal reference to Sarah into the dative case—works best. See Attridge, *Hebrews* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 324–326. I am persuaded that Abraham should be retained as the subject of the clause.

⁸ Genesis 12:3.

⁹ Nathanael Greene (1742–1786) served under George Washington in the Continental Army for the duration of the American Revolutionary War. Andrew Jackson (1767–1845), president of the United States from 1829–1837, is infamous for his forced relocation of Native peoples to land west of the Mississippi River per the Indian Removal Act, which he signed into law on 28 May 1830. The Baptist deacon in our family lineage was Tyrell J. Jackson (1805–1868); the Baptist minister was Thomas Benton McComb (1820–1913).

¹⁰ Hebrews 10:23: “Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.” See also Heb 6:10–12, 7:6.

¹¹ There is a lengthy discussion in the scholarly literature about the meaning of the Greek word ἔλεγχος translated as “conviction” in, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (11:1). Consensus now holds that a better translation of that word is “evidence” or “proof.” See S. M. Baugh, “The Cloud of Witnesses in Hebrews 11” (*Westminster Theological Journal* 68 [2006]: 113–132), 114–117; Attridge, *Hebrews*, 310.

¹² See Gen 18:14, Matt 19:26, Mark 14:36, and Luke 1:37.

¹³ Isaiah 35:5–7.

¹⁴ Hebrews 1:3.