

**August 11, 2019
Hebrews 11:1-2, 8-16
Pastor Rosanna McFadden
Creekside COB**

“Homeward Bound”

Good morning! I have to confess I had some trouble narrowing down the scripture text for this morning: the book of Hebrews is a rich and complicated essay on the nature of Christianity and our covenant with God through Jesus Christ. Although Hebrews is one of the later texts of the New Testament, it pulls in a lot of references and imagery from the Old Testament. Chapter 11 alone could be the basis of an entire sermon series: it begins with a beautiful and brief definition of faith, and then the author goes through an All-Star list of folks from the Old Testament -- Hebrews 11 has sometimes been called the Hall of Faith - - and culminates with the idea that although all these people were commended for their faith, God has provided something better. And Chapter 12 tells us to look toward Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. It is great writing, a dramatic build-up to the author’s point about Jesus Christ, and waaaay too much material to cover in a single sermon.

So this morning I want to focus on just one character in this Hall of Faith, and one particularly evocative phrase which the author of Hebrews uses to describe him. I would guess that some of you know Hebrews 11:1 by heart, and that many more of you recognize it as soon as you hear it. If you’ve been around Elkhart City/Creekside for 15 years or more, your strongest association may be with the name of the capital campaign we had to raise funds to build this building. It was appropriate then, and I believe it resonates with our ministry today: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval.” I like the Message paraphrase, which says it this way: The fundamental fact of existence is that this trust in God, this faith is the firm foundation under everything that makes life worth living. It’s our

handle on what we can't see. The act of faith is what distinguished our ancestors, set them above the crowd.

Abraham's story, what set him above the crowd, is summarized beginning in verse 8: he was called to leave his earthly home and live in tents in order to establish a city with foundations: a city which Abraham would never see completed; a heavenly city whose architect and builder is God. Verse 12 says, and therefore from one person -- and this one as good as dead -- descendants were born. Now, I don't know about you, but I don't think it's very polite to refer to someone as "as good as dead." In fact, that kind of reference would have been actively discouraged in any of my pastoral care training. I would hope that even hospice chaplains -- maybe especially hospice chaplains -- would know better than to tell family members things like, "I just prayed with your mother, and she's as good as dead."

The author of Hebrews is, of course, making a point. God had made a covenant with Abraham that Abraham would be the father of a great nation, and his descendants would be as numerous as the stars or the grains of sand. Problem was, Abraham and his wife Sarah didn't have any descendants. Abraham was going to adopt a slave as a son, but God said, no it will be your own child. Sarah suggested that Abraham sleep with her Egyptian handmaiden Hagar, who did have a son, Ishmael. Abraham was 86 when Ishmael was born, which is pretty impressive. But Sarah became so jealous that she sent Hagar and Ishmael away to their deaths -- or so she thought. So when Abraham was 100 years old with no heir to carry on his name and no prospect of fathering more children -- given that he and Sarah had been trying for at least 75 years or so -- he was as good as dead. God could, of course, have chosen a young and vigorous man to be the father of a nation; or God could have started that nation with Abraham and Sarah 75 years earlier when he was 25 and Sarah was 15, but God didn't do that. God waited until Abraham was as good as dead (and Sarah, at 90 years old was pretty skeptical) because Abraham trusted in God's promises. Promises Abraham would not see completed in his lifetime. And although Abraham was as good as dead at 100 years old, after Sarah died, he married a woman named Keturah. I don't know what Keturah thought was going to happen; I hope she didn't marry Abraham for his livestock and his tents, because Abraham was

clearly *not* as good as dead; Abraham fathered 6 children with Keturah and lived to the age of 175.

I am not arguing that everything that is alive should stay alive. There may be practices and programs which have run their course and need to end. There are attitudes and ideologies of discrimination and hatred which we may have thought were as good as dead, but have come to life in ugly and violent ways. These hateful ideologies should die, instead of more people dying. But these programs -- as good as they may have been in the 1960s -- and attitudes of hatred are not covenants from God. They are our best, and sometimes our worst, efforts to make the world the way we think it ought to be, to make our own vision a reality. The witness of Hebrews, using the example of the Old Testament, is that we covenant with God, but our vision is not our own; we are called to have faith in things which we cannot see and which we cannot accomplish on our own. Our vision which is from God can only be completed through Jesus Christ, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. We are on a journey to our homeland, and that home is not any place we've seen. If we are fortunate and have been nurtured in love and community, we may have caught glimpses of that home, but for Christians, our homeland is not someplace we are going *back to*, it is someplace we are journeying *toward*.

The title of this sermon is Homeward Bound. For me, that is not just a phrase, it's the title of a children's book, *Homeward Bound: The Incredible Journey* which was made into a movie in 1963 and again in 1993. It's the story of three pets-- two dogs and a cat -- who are left behind at a friends' ranch while the children who own them move to a new home. The pets think they've been abandoned and escape in search of their owners, and make their way through the perils of the wilderness in search of their new home and the children they love. How many of you know this film? This movie was a big deal for my children. The movie ends on Thanksgiving Day, and a few years ago the kids were all home for Thanksgiving and got to talking about this movie and its wonderful musical theme. We decided to watch the last 5 minutes or so, and by the time the musical theme was playing for the final time, we were all in tears. It happened to me again when I watched it in preparation for this sermon. I can't show it to you for copyright reasons, but I think I can set the scene for you.

The three children in this newly-blended family have been devastated by the loss of their pets. They have heard that the animals have been spotted in the area, but they haven't been able to find them. The children and their parents are at their new home for Thanksgiving standing mournfully outside the house when they hear a bark, and Chance, the bulldog who belongs to the youngest boy comes bounding over the hill. Minutes later there's a meow and the girl's cat comes running up. There are joyful reunions until they become aware of Peter, the oldest boy, whose faithful retriever Shadow did not return. Peter shakes his head and turns to go into the house and says, "He was old. It was too far. He was just too old." In other words, Shadow is as good as dead. When Becca was a toddler, I enacted this scene many times. Becca was always Peter and she'd shake her head and say, "It was too far, he was too old," -- at this point in the movie the *colò* French horn comes in with this beautiful melody -- and Becca would wait a few beats and say sotto voce *OK Mom, bark* and I would go Ruff Ruff and she would shout "Shadow! Shadow, I missed you so much!" and she would run and give me a big hug. Can you see why this movie makes me cry?

Listen to Hebrews 13-16: "All these [that is, all the descendants of Abraham] 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 they left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is a heavenly one." That, sisters and brothers, is the home we are bound for. No one on earth has been there before, but the fathers and mothers of our faith, the prophets, the writers of the Old Testament laid the foundation for that homeland with their faithful action. If we look toward Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, he will guide us home. Even in situations where it seems like hope is as good as dead, faith can take us beyond what we can see to the conviction of things we cannot see. As the Message says, trust in God is the firm foundation under everything that makes life worth living. May we walk by faith. Amen.