

**BY FAITH: REORIENT,
REFOCUS, RECEIVE**
SERIES: STORIES OF FAITH,
HEBREWS 11



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Hebrews 11:8-12
Third Message
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Hebrews 11:8-12

Good morning! I am excited to be here with you this morning. My name is Brian Shiu, and I serve as one of the elders at PBC. It's great to see you all, especially after this last season of the pandemic.

While I realize it's a holiday weekend and our attendance is a bit lighter, some of the news recently highlighted that California's population actually declined for the first time since the 1850s. Some of that was pinned on the pandemic. One study I read said that 50% of all registered voters have considered moving. Have you thought about leaving? I know that's a topic that my wife and I think about; it's a topic we hear many young families discuss as they try to figure out where to set down roots.

What are some of the reasons for leaving? Here are some of the reasons I read about: jobs, affordable housing, taxes, a better life for family, politics, business-friendly environment. I'm sure, whether you've thought about moving or not. A lot of these are basic questions we all face about where we live and how we will live.

There was, however, one factor that I don't think the polls found: God calling them to leave. I'm not saying that this wasn't a factor—just something that the polls did not find.

Think about this for yourself: How do you approach these big life decisions? What is your guiding North Star? High school and college graduates, congratulations! Many of you are in the midst of figuring out big next step questions—where am I going to school? What job should I take? Young professionals, are you part of the reported 50% that are ready to change jobs post-pandemic? For some of us getting closer to the back-end of our careers—where are we going to retire? We are all in the midst of this process of living life.

This morning we will be continuing our series “Stories of Faith” and looking at Hebrews 11:8-12. In these verses, the faith of Abraham and Sarah are on display. These two are central characters in the Bible.

We'll see that Abraham and Sarah faced similar life choices and concerns that we face in our lives. We can learn from their example.

The passage presents to us three statements that start with the phrase “By faith.” First, we'll see that by faith, we need first to reorient our life to the call of Jesus. Once we're reoriented, we'll need to refocus on God as we live our life. When we've refocused, we can receive what God is doing. Reorient, refocus, receive.

A few years ago, my family and I spent an afternoon enjoying the Bay Area outdoors hiking Angel Island. Even though I have lived in the area for a couple of decades, this was my first trip to Angel Island. The irony was not lost on me that I was taking my family to this place for some fun.

Some 80 years earlier, my grandfather also came to Angel Island—not for a day of rest, but as a stopping point for many Chinese immigrants on their journey to America. I only remember a few stories my grandfather told me about his stay there. Mainly he thought it was funny that the guards could understand a bit of Chinese so that you couldn't talk behind their back.

My grandfather left China in search of a better life. He left his wife and two young daughters—my mom said she wouldn't see him again for another 10-15 years until she eventually came to America. Somehow he spent some time in Mankato, Minnesota. He served the US military in World War II. My grandfather finally settled in Oakland and saved enough money to bring his family over. It is still hard for me to really grasp his story and what that must have meant to leave his family and country—to venture to a foreign land, not know the language, make a life for yourself, your family, and those who would follow.

Many of you have similar stories in our family's history. Maybe your own story is very similar. Of course, this is a very physical description of life going and moving, but equally, there are relational, emotional, and spiritual components as well. Where is your life going?

Let's look at verse 8. Where was Abraham going?

Hebrews 11:8:

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.

By Faith

“By faith.” Stop right there. When you hear this phrase “By faith,” how does it make you feel? What is your gut reaction? Positive? Neutral? Negative? You can already sense where I'm going with this, right? All these big life decisions have to be made by faith? How does that make you feel?

If you've been with us in this series “Stories of Faith: Hebrews 11,” we've already seen how faith is defined in the first verse of this chapter: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1).

I understand if you hear the statement “By faith,” and it makes you feel less than positive. It sounds risky. How do you trust something that's supposed to happen in the future, something I cannot see? Let me suggest that faith is not focused on the thing in the future but on the one who can guarantee that future. You might say that's even more crazy. Who can guarantee the future? Who can guarantee an outcome? I can't. You can't. As hard as we can work to control the future and the outcome, we cannot. I would argue it is riskier to trust yourself for an outcome, for your life, for your future. We might have a guiding North Star principle, we might have goals set for our life, work really, really hard, be really great at what we do, but we can't guarantee any of it.

This passage offers a different way.

Hebrews 11:8:

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.

If we read a little more into verse 8, we see that “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called.”

In Abraham's story, which starts in Genesis 12, life changes for him because someone calls him into action. Abraham isn't following his own plan anymore.

Genesis 12:1:

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.

From this verse in Genesis, we see that it is the Lord who said or called and directed Abraham.

Who is this Lord?

The Bible starts with Genesis precisely to tell us there is one who is so powerful that all of existence is caused by this one, this God, this Lord. One who could create everything, including you and me, can certainly direct where our lives go. This is the one who is the object of Abraham's faith.

I will admit that Abraham's interactions with God are probably a little different from what you and I have had. Several times in Genesis, it is said that the Lord says to Abraham or even appeared to Abraham. Certainly, these kinds of personal interactions would make it easier for you or me to trust in this God, right?

So how do you hear his call?

Maybe during COVID, you, like a lot of people, turned to more outdoor activities. The next time you're out on a hike, take note of that sense of awe, the sense of wonder that you feel being outside in nature. The book of Romans tells us that this is God telling you he is right here. Listen to that. He is calling you.

Here's another way to hear his call. This morning, you are listening to what I hope is a faithful preaching from what is called the Word of God, the Bible. God is calling you. And specifically, the Bible tells us that Jesus calls us to follow him. Search the Bible and see who this Jesus is.

Here's another way to hear his call. You are here this morning and surrounded by others who know who this Lord is. This group of people here can demonstrate who this Lord is by demonstrating love for you and others. No, we're not perfect, but get to know this community, and because God has loved us, we are to love in a way that shows who he is.

Jose and Melissa joined our community group a few years ago. Jose and I had coffee together, and I told him about this passage, and he shared his story with me. I thought, *Wow, your life is like a great parallel to this story.* I asked Jose, "Would you mind sharing it with others?"

Who is it that is guiding and directing your life? Abraham's faith was in the Lord, who created everything. This is the foundation for Abraham's actions.

In the same way, the Lord is calling you. Take a moment to listen.

Hebrews 11:8:

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.

So now we get into the action. Abraham obeyed God's call. Abraham left the familiar for the unfamiliar. Yes, absolutely, we're talking about physically moving. But in many ways, this is a picture of the spiritual journey. I'm sure Abraham had plans for his life, for his family, how things would look. To suddenly change course—to go somewhere you don't know—to follow the call of God, Abraham had to reorient everything in his life to follow this call.

This spiritual reorientation is a necessity for all of us. If you've been around churches, you have heard the word "repent." It means to change one's mind or purpose. Instead of living a life oriented for yourself, you live a life reoriented to God. It may feel like leaving everything we know—a direction of life that was not planned for—but it is fully worth it if we know who it is that calls us. Abraham heard the call from the Lord. We know the Lord as Jesus Christ. Reorient your life to the call of Jesus to follow him.

My grandfather was eventually able to bring my grandmother, mom, and aunt to America. My dad also immigrated to the US in the 1960s. He and my mom married, had two kids, and moved down to Southern California. I grew up in what was then a small town called Diamond Bar. There were very few Asians there at the time. I am pretty sure I was the only Chinese kid at my school. And I felt this. I knew I was different. As a four-year-old, I remember playing with a neighbor who was my age. His name was Warren. We were playing at my house when he told me it was time for him to go home. Out of the blue, I remember asking him, "Is it

because I'm Chinese?" To be fair to Warren, he had never given any indication of that being the reason. So what made me think as a four-year-old this was the reason? That sense of not belonging was real and has persisted. I would spend most of my life trying to fit in. But most of the time, I felt like I didn't.

My dad's father gave me my middle name Kin Ting. He passed just months before I was born. My dad told me he gave me that name because he wanted me to "build a boat and go back to China." Finally, in my early 20s, I got a chance to go to China, and one of the stops was in the area where both grandfathers had come from. It was a very surreal trip for me. I knew I didn't belong here either. People also looked at me differently, wondered if I was Filipino or Hispanic. I surely wasn't Chinese.

As I sat on a train going to our next destination, I thought about where I belonged. I realized that maybe I would have grown up there in China if my grandfather had not left. Then I believe the Lord showed me something. He showed me that nearly every one of my grandfather's descendants had heard the call of Jesus and, by faith, are following him since coming to America. I think the Lord was quietly saying to me, your home is somewhere else. Refocusing on that brought a lot of my experiences into a different perspective.

Let's move to the next "By faith" statement, where we'll see how refocusing on God helps Abraham to live in the present.

Hebrews 11:9-10:

By faith he went to *live* in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. 10 For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.

If you're not familiar with Abraham's story, or if you're taking these few verses at a glance, you might think Abraham had a pretty straightforward life of faith. If you reorient your life towards God, that's it, right? It will all just work out, right?

Abraham was 75 years old when he heard God's call and left. Abraham dies at the age of 175. If we read a little further in Genesis 12:7, we see that God told Abraham he would give his descendants this land. In Genesis 13:15, God says that he will give the land to Abraham and his descendants. For 100 years, Abraham lived with

this promise in view, and Hebrews confirms he never actually received the land. He got to live in it but never possessed it. Abraham never had a house of his own; he lived in tents. Those of you going to Camp PBC in a few weeks will get to experience this for a week. For most of us, one week living in tents is enough!

Living in that tension could not have been easy. It's like waiting for Christmas morning to open presents... every day...for 100 years. What sustains Abraham, Hebrews tells us, is that Abraham is in it for the long haul, the end game. Abraham was looking for or constantly refocusing on God.

This verse tells us that Abraham lived. He did not just sit idly by waiting for life to happen to him, waiting for the promises of God to come true. When you live life, you're going to get some stuff right, and some stuff wrong. Yes, Abraham obeys God's call, and yes, he is oriented to what God is doing, but Abraham's life is far from perfect. Sometimes, you need to rest and refocus. Abraham definitely makes mistakes, some pretty egregious ones, and even repeats them. Sometimes he acts as a warrior, a rescuer. Sometimes he's a good father and husband. Sometimes not. But God is in all these smaller stories as well. If you're not perfect, don't lose heart. Abraham was far from perfect. Refocus on God.

Hebrews 11:9-10:

By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. 10 For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.

As we look into the verse further, Abraham lived as in a foreign land. The New American Standard Bible (NASB 1995) version of this passage says "lived as an alien."

Feeling like the alien can be an unsettling feeling like it was for me in my story. I feel that tension in so many different ways now as a follower of Jesus. I don't want to be the alien, the one that everyone looks at when you walk into a room. I want to assimilate, to blend in, to belong to the new surroundings. That's my natural instinct because if this is my home, then I want to fit in.

And so that tension makes me wonder, *How do I spend my time? How do I view my career? How do I spend money? How do I raise my kids? What do I encourage them to do? How do we live life as an alien?* Embrace being the

alien. If we constantly refocus on where our home truly is, maybe that will help us. Perhaps, instead of trying not to be a foreigner, we can bring some of home to here.

Citizens of heaven are characterized by the fruit of the Spirit. "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law" (Galatians 5:22-23).

Abraham wasn't an alien alone. He was with heirs of the same promise. Maybe one way we can live is to look around us and help other aliens.

One topic we discussed recently at an elders meeting was how we are doing in terms of discipleship. The word "discipleship" at PBC means a lot. It has historically looked like gathering in smaller groups of people, studying the Bible together, encouraging people to be independently dependent on Jesus. We believe it's still important for us to do that today. If you're not in a discipleship group but want to be in one, reach out to us.

In this same discussion, we also noted PBC generally has a strong sense of community. But sometimes, breaking into those communities can be challenging. Let's remember we have fellow aliens journeying with us, and they need to be part of the bubble as well. One of the challenges during the pandemic was to try to stay connected while being asked to stay apart. As we start to regather, look for ways God might be asking you to connect with other people.

There are aliens outside of our PBC community that we can help as well. I mentioned at the beginning that many people had left California. One story I read noted that locals were leaving, but there continued to be an influx of foreign workers. An article from 2016 noted that 71% of tech workers are foreign-born. Maybe God is calling us to reach out to those who feel like aliens in this land to show them where they can find their real home.

There are some in our area who don't have homes. I'm grateful for those in our body who have made things like the Heart and Home shelter a part of our PBC fabric.

We've touched on racial justice issues for similar reasons, not because of political ideology, but because we are looking at what God would want us to do.

Overall, hate crimes reported to law enforcement rose 31% in the state last year, with attacks against Asians up by 107%, according to the report released

Wednesday. Hate crimes against Black people, which constituted a majority of racially motivated attacks last year, increased by 88%. Anti-Latino crimes rose 38%. “For too many, 2020 wasn't just about a deadly virus. It was about an epidemic of hate,” state Attorney General Rob Bonta said.”¹

What was the first fruit of the Spirit from Galatians? Love. We can and need to make a difference. Refocus on Goad as you live your life.

This year is Vanessa and my 20th anniversary. It has been a very blessed 20 years. But it was also an adventurous nine years from the time we met until we got married. We only dated two of those nine years. Let's just say there wasn't a lot of fruit for my efforts.

When we both finished school, we seemed to be headed to different parts of the world. She was headed to the East Coast and I moved to the Bay Area. It seemed like this was not going to happen, and frankly, it was time to move on. A few months later, a good friend of ours tells me, “You know Vanessa got a job out here.” I figure the Bay Area's a big place; we probably won't cross paths. Then a little while later our friend says, “Yeah, she's living with a family friend in Cupertino,” which just happens to be where I had started a new job. Well, I figure Cupertino is a big place. Months go by, and I think there was a dinner for our mutual friend, so of course, she will be there. I figure it's a big dinner I can hide somewhere. Somehow we started talking and she mentions she's looking for a church. I had been at PBC for a bit, was in a Young Adult Fellowship (YAF) men's group with Scott Grant, and I told her I liked it and she should check PBC out. I didn't really mean it, and I remember thinking, *Why did I say that?* A few months pass and Vanessa hasn't shown up.

One Sunday morning, Scott was preaching. I think it was one of the first times he was preaching, so he had some of the YAFers to participate in the service. Scott asked me to read a passage. As I finished and started walking down the steps from the stage, a random thought popped into my head: *if there's any Sunday she's going to visit, it's today.* I turned to look at the Fireside Room, and sure enough, Vanessa is sitting there. She started attending PBC about the same time Scott was encouraging me to find a place to serve. He said it seemed like the High School Ministry would be a great place to pour your life into some young folks. So I started checking out that group. So did she. Now I'm wondering, *What are you doing here God?*

One night, I was out for a run, and I was kind of wrestling with God about this. And it's one of those times in life where you hear that small whisper, “You just want me to tell you what's going to happen. Just trust me.” It literally stopped me in my tracks. No matter how hard I tried to make something happen or even run from it, ultimately, I had to trust God and receive what he was going to do.

So far, we've seen Abraham reorient his life toward God. He had to refocus on God as he lived life waiting for the promise. Now we'll see that Sarah had to live “By faith” to do something that can be very difficult for us—receive what God is doing.

Hebrews 11:11:

By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.

This time the “By faith” statement focuses on Sarah. Sarah was not able to bear children. This is a huge struggle, a source of heartache for many. For Sarah, she's heard the promise at age 65 that through Abraham, God would make him a great nation. Where did that leave her in this story? Eleven years after first hearing the promise, physically moving into the promised land and yet seeing no children, Sarah offers Abraham her servant Hagar to bear Abraham a child, seemingly to start this promise. As we read more about this story, this choice leads to more heartache for our characters, and ultimately this child would not be how God carries out his plan.

Later we find the Lord visits Abraham and Sarah at age 90, and he tells them again they will have a son. Sarah in the distance laughs. Would you blame her? By the way, we always hear that Sarah laughs, but Abraham laughed too in chapter 17, so let's be fair here.

I think this verse in Hebrews implies that somehow Sarah changed, that she went from laughing to receiving what God was going to do. She went from trying to manufacture and control an outcome to realizing there was physically nothing she could do. She realized if anything were going to happen, God would make it happen and that he was faithful who had promised. She refocused and received.

Now I don't want you to mistake what I'm saying here. Having children is not the ultimate goal for us or the measure of faith. It's definitely a powerful part

of our human experience. Each phase of that process presents its own challenges of faith. Many bring us to those “laughing moments” which, as we know, really isn't laughter but pain. But hopefully, God will use that to bring us to a place where we can receive what he is doing. Singleness can be hard. Waiting to have children can be hard. Having children is hard. I am always humbled to read the prayer requests from parents continuing to pray for their adult children. We really can't do anything about these circumstances or outcomes.

By faith, we receive what God will do. Through Abraham and Sarah came blessings to us all.

We're coming to the last verse of our passage. I've always thought if we were talking about great stories of faith here in Hebrews 11, why didn't the writer of Hebrews tell what might be the most famous story about Abraham's faith—how God tested Abraham's obedience, even to the point of offering to sacrifice his own son? I think the writer of Hebrews is acknowledging this. Verse 12 echoes Genesis 22:17-18, which closes out that particular story from Abraham's life: “I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, 18 and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.”

Hebrews 11:12:

Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.

Abraham and Sarah waited a long time to have their child. With Isaac a teenager, God makes an incomprehensible request to have Abraham offer up Isaac as a sacrifice. Abraham faithfully obeys until God intervenes. God recognizes Abraham's willingness to follow, even giving up probably the one thing that meant the most to Abraham.

Eventually, however, THE son of Abraham was sacrificed. The gospel of Matthew begins this way: “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matthew 1:1).

God wove this incredible story, starting with Abraham and culminating in the life of Jesus. Abraham's son Isaac was spared. Abraham's son Jesus— God's son—was not. Because of that, if you hear Jesus' call to reorient your life to follow him, to refocus on Jesus as you live your life so that you can receive what Jesus is doing, then Galatians tells us: “And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise” (Galatians 3:29).

You are “the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.”

And the promise is to live “in the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.”

Reorient, refocus, and receive.

Endnotes

1. “Attorney General Bonta Unveils New Guidance, Reports to Help Public and Law Enforcement Better Understand and Address Hate Crimes” (*Press Release: State of California Department of Justice*, June 20, 2021). <https://oag.ca.gov/news/press-releases/attorney-general-bonta-unveils-new-guidance-reports-help-public-and-law>.