

**August 4, 2019**  
**Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Isaiah 1:1, 10-20**  
**19<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings**

When I meet with two people before they are about to get married, our tradition has it that I should engage with them in some pre-marital counseling, that I should spend some time talking with them about how to make their marriage successful, that I should give them some tools to deal with problems when they arise, and that I should make some judgment on whether they are well suited for one another. That last part has always troubled me. Do I know enough about marriage to judge whether the two people standing in front of me have what it takes to be successful in that endeavor? I think I've estimated that in the years I've been doing this that I have officiated at a bit more than 300 weddings. And none of those couples, not one, has ever come to me saying, "Do you think we should get married?" No, they come to me saying, "We're going to get married, will you do it?" So I meet with them and we plan the ceremony and we try to talk through a few things that might help them along the way. But I don't think that I'm so egotistical that when they come upon problems in their relationship or with their families or their children, that they think to themselves, "Now what did Pastor Mark say about this?" There are much bigger influences in their lives that affect their marriage than me. That's why, when I am meeting with a couple, I almost always ask them, "Who is your example for what a good marriage looks like? Who do you have in your life that you say, 'I want my marriage to be like theirs.'" Because that is how we learn to do so many things in our lives, by example. Not by someone telling us what to do, but by watching what they do and trying to imitate them. You learned to tie your shoes by watching someone, not by a lecture about how to make a knot with two shoelaces. That's how you learned to knit or to swing a baseball bat or so many other things in life, by watching someone else do it first and imitating them.

That's what this part of the letter to the Hebrews is all about. It's sort of like God's Hall of Fame. The writer lifts up examples from the past about how to live in faith. A life of faith is not something that

can be easily explained, but it is something that can be imitated. Here are some examples, says the writer of this letter: there's Abel and Enoch and Noah and Isaac and Jacob and Joseph and Rahab and David and Samuel and so many others. But one of his greatest examples is Abraham. Everyone knows the story of Abraham, right? Well, maybe not. That's why the writer of Hebrews tells us again. Because the story of Abraham is important. It's important because Abraham is the spiritual parent of so many people. Sometimes you will hear the phrase "Abrahamic religions" or "Abrahamic faiths."

Broadly speaking the religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all trace the beginnings of their belief in one God back to the persons of Abraham and Sarah. That means that more than half of the world's population have this couple as their spiritual parents.

Abraham and Sarah lived in what is now Iraq in the valley of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. We think this took place almost 4,000 years ago when that valley was the site of one of the first great civilizations of the world. Abraham and Sarah lived with Abraham's nephew Lot near the city of Haran, but they had no children of their own. And they were growing old. Abraham was 75 years old when this story starts. I don't know about you, but when I am 75, I hope to be settling down, not starting something new. When Erin and I talk about where we want to be when we eventually retire, the phrase I hear over and over again is "wherever the grandkids are." I'm sure many of you have said the same thing. But what about for Abraham and Sarah? They are in their 70s and have no children. That's when God speaks to them. "Get up," he says. "Get ready to go. I'm going to take you to a new land that I will give to you and your children." Land and children. That is what God promises to Abraham and Sarah in their old age. And then something amazing happens. Something that resonates down to us through the ages. Something that lifts them up above our other spiritual ancestors. Abraham believes God. And they go. They pack up their stuff and they go, off to a new land, never to return. All because God told them to. They believe God. They have faith and it sets their feet moving.

Eventually they settle down in what is now Israel and Palestine and they have a son, Isaac. And that story comes down to us, and the writer of the letter to the Hebrews lifts it up as a reminder, as an

example of faith, of the kind of faith that we can have also.

Just as we may need examples of what a good marriage looks like, so also we need examples of a life of faith. What does it mean to live a faithful life, believing in God? Is it just words, is it actions, is it a way of living your life? What does that look like? What about you? Who is your example of faith? When you look back on your life, who was it that was your example? Who took you to church? Who read Bible stories to you? Who taught you to pray? Maybe it was your father or mother, maybe it was a grandparent or an older sibling. It could have been a neighbor or a friend, but probably there was someone along the way who helped plant those seed of faith. And there were others along the way who helped water that seed. Who were they? As you took your first steps of faith, who was there to help you along and show you the way? Who was it that explained what it meant to live faithfully, to love your neighbor, to sing joyfully, to worship regularly? Again maybe it was a parent, or a pastor, or someone you sat next to you in church, a Sunday School teacher, a friend. Who was your example of faith? Who was it that showed you that faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not yet seen? Someone along the way taught you that when you step out in faith and pray to God that sometimes your prayers are answered, you get the job, the child is born, the parent is healed. But sometimes the prayer is answered by waiting. Abraham and Sarah waited a long time for that child. Part of the life of faith is believing that God is faithful and that God has something in store for us in the future. Who taught you that faith means waiting on God? Part of our lesson today is to offer God thanksgiving for those whom God gave us as examples, those who showed us how to live in faith. But this lesson also brings up a new question for us: for whom are we an example? Who is it that looks at you and thinks, "this is what faithful living looks like"? Who did you read Bible stories to, or take to Sunday School or Vacation Bible School? Who sat in your Sunday School class or next to you in worship? For whom are you an example of faith? Your children, perhaps. Maybe even your spouse. Your grandchildren, your neighbors. Does anyone look at you and know that you believe, that your faith makes your feet move into new places? Because someone sees you. There is someone who sees



that you get up on Sunday mornings and come to church, even when it is a beautiful summer morning that could be spent reading the paper on the porch or getting ready to go to the lake. Someone sees you reading your Bible or praying before you eat or before you sleep. Someone sees you take time on the occasional Friday to take leftovers from the local Panera down to the juvenile home. Someone sees you come out to bring food to the Kids in Boxes and then you stay and talk to the kids and you're not getting paid anything for this. Why do you do it someone may wonder? Because like Abraham and Sarah and David and Ruth and Samuel and so many others, you saw something in the distance. A better world, a homeland, heaven, who knows. But you heard the promise that God is taking us there and it got your feet moving. Are your feet moving? Because there is someone watching. To someone, you are the example of what faith looks like.