

**By Faith**  
**Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16**  
**Sermon by Rev. J. Michael Cobb**  
**Ninth Sunday in Pentecost**  
**Woodbury UMC**  
**August 7, 2022**

If any of you have heard of the author Douglas Adams, it is probably for his *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* book sequence. His second best known book after those is probably *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency*. It has been a long time since I've read it, so I remember just a few things from it. One that has stuck with me is what the title character refers to as Zen Navigation.

*His method of "Zen" navigation, which was simply to find any car that looked as if it knew where it was going and follow it. The results were more often surprising than successful, but he felt it was worth it for the sake of the few occasions when it was both.*

Perhaps the reason this has stayed with me is because I have never been especially good with directions, or even with estimating distances. For my early life it was embarrassing, not knowing how to get to places, not having a sense of how long it would take to go ten miles. Ten miles, so that's about ten minutes, right? Well, not on a road that's going 40 miles an hour it isn't. On top of this I really dislike being late.

I know people who love maps. LOVE maps. I've never been one of them. For that matter, I know people who get great satisfaction out of routing out every turn on a trip before leaving the driveway, no matter how long or how short. That has never been me either. I really couldn't tell you why, but for a long time I just figured that if something was north of me, then just head north, and either figure it out along the way, or stop and ask directions, or SOMEHOW you'd get there. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this method often did not work.

I don't know if you remember what a big deal it was when Mapquest came out. You could just type in your destination address, and it could calculate a route — that you'd print out on paper, and try to navigate by that while driving — in hindsight not a great idea, but still revolutionary.

I remember buying a car with built in GPS. The way it worked was that it used your phone for figuring out where you were, and compared that to a DVD that was hidden under the passengers seat, if I remember that one right. And it would give you turn by turn directions on how to get to where you were going. I had that car for about 12 years, and by the time we got rid of it we were just shy of 300 thousand miles. Which is impressive. However, during regular maintenance, the dealer wanted several hundred dollars to swap out the DVD for an update - and that is just insulting!

So I didn't do it. It was fine for the first year, the first few years really. But after a while, there would be road construction. Or buildings torn down, and new buildings put up, so you'd put in an address for Taco Bell, and end up at a strip mall that had been closed for years. That's frustrating, but even worse was knowing people that lived in newly constructed homes. Their address doesn't exist. One time when I finally figured out where a house was, my map indicated it as a big empty field. No wonder I kept going right past it, oblivious to how close I really was.

I think of this when reading some old Biblical stories, particularly those from the first 5 books, with Abraham's wanderings, and of course Moses bringing the people through the wilderness. Our scripture today is from Hebrews, and this passage keeps hammering away at one point: By faith, by faith, by faith. The first few verses keep up the mantra of things done in faith. "By faith we understand" — the idea being that in trusting God we have a different knowledge from that of the world.

This short text offers examples of people stepping out in faith despite not having earthly information you'd want before doing a job or taking a risk. And yet, I can't help but consider one point as I read the words of this ancient source of wisdom.

What is the difference between having faith, and being a fool?

After all, I was never going to be a person that got excited about maps, but it would have been a lot smarter to have a few roads, a few turns, a few landmarks. Even if I didn't have it all, having a few big parts of the journey planned out would have saved me a lot of anxiety and embarrassment. That was foolish of me, and needlessly so.

What is the difference between having faith, and deluding yourself?

That is a hard question to hear, let alone a hard question to answer. Faith is maybe the most important thing about us Christians, that we have faith in God, faith in the identity of Jesus as the Messiah, faith that through him we are reconciled to God. Staking your life on something with no evidence — isn't that the height of self delusion? Yet in 1 Corinthians, Paul reminds us that “the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

In Christ, we may not have every step of the way mapped out, but if we have faith in Jesus, we have all we need. Some of us have it more together, of course. Some of us are smarter, some more educated, some just better at paying attention. But ultimately, faith means knowing you don't know everything, but believing that what you DO know is enough.

Faith is also personal. What I have experienced of God is not yours, so my conviction may be foolishness to you. Then again, your experience of God is not mine, so your faith is based on experiences I do not share.

One big thing being said here is about taking concrete action by faith — Maybe not understanding everything you need — but your needs are supplied by God.

That is half of what I get from this text. We know that God is faithful because we see it reflected again and again and again in these ancestors, each acting in faith, and God was faithful to them all. Even if the world can't see the wisdom in it, be faithful to God. The other part requires you to do something.

Verse 13 says that people died in faith without receiving what was promised. How must that look? You live your life in faith, and then you die without getting or even seeing what was promised. It looks an awful lot like you have deluded yourself. The scripture says that they saw the promises from far away and they welcomed them. “They desire for a better country”, that is, a heavenly one” — might this mean not settling just for the things of this lifetime? It seems that their faith is in things that weren't granted to them, but came later.

I think we are being told that wisdom lies in telling the story to the next generation, that they are part of this promise, too. Not only that, but ancestral faith is being praised here as an example for us. The thing is: Have you ever read those old stories? The people were faithless throughout! — yet here they are being praised for having been faithful! Maybe this is why we talk about God as a heavenly parent — offering an amazing love to us, no matter what! I read in this that there is hope for all of us, that our shortcomings will fade over time, so that we can be remembered for our faith, too.

That is my last point, and my most important point. You should try to live a good life. I hope I make my parents proud. I'm guessing at one time or another,

you wanted to live your life in a way that would make your parents proud of you. Yet maybe what's better is to flip the script. Instead of being concerned about making our parents proud, be concerned about making our great great great grandchildren proud. Dedicate ourselves to be a good ancestors.

The hearers of Hebrews were to be proud of how their ancestors acted, and to be aware of how those actions affected their present-day lives. How can you live differently right now, so your great great great grandchildren are proud of you? It is a powerful motivator, right?

If this is your lens, you will not always see the fruits of our faithfulness. If we can find a way to prevent the collapse of our climate, it will be hard work and sacrifice for us, but five generations from now might not happen otherwise. Those born a hundred years ago were the WW2 generation. There is no denying, the way they lived has a direct impact on our lives today. If the fruits of our faithfulness are born out for those who come after us but not us, does that demonstrate the wisdom of faith in God? How can we know, if we will never see those fruits?

If we know God to be faithful, to keep God's promises, then even with many, many things unknown, that is all we really need to take action. I have told my sons on more than one occasion, how the choices available to them and indeed much of their lives are directly impacted by decisions their great grandparents made.

Let us live so that when good news is preached in 100, 200, 500 years — it can it be said that God brought good news, and it came through us. Amen.

