

Prepare us, O Lord, for your heavenly city,
and make us people of whom you are not ashamed. Amen.

It was a glad and glorious day for me
when I finally graduated from college,
and frankly, I couldn't wait to leave.
I was so relieved to be done with it all
that it took me over five years
to return to the place that had, after all,
been 'home' for four years.

When I did, at last, go back,
I was absolutely struck by how beautiful the campus was
and by how idyllic the life had been.
I suffered a rather acute attack of nostalgia,
and wondered why I'd ever been so anxious to leave.

"Those were the days", thought I,
and then I was appalled
at how much I sounded like Archie Bunker.

But nostalgia is like that isn't it?
Nostalgia almost inevitably is a fond look back,
and very often, it's fond at the expense of being accurate.
We yearn for the 'good old days' when life was lovely:
when crime was unknown, and everybody had a job,
and nobody'd ever heard of drugs.
Except, of course, that those 'good old days' never existed.

We Christian indulge in that same kind of nostalgia,
when we gaze back at the early days of the Church:
you know, that mythical time when everybody 'got along',
when the Body of Christ was untroubled by debates about
the interpretation of Scripture,
or thorny moral issues like abortion.

In our dreams, right?
Because college life did have its problems,
and while the issues we faced may not have been life-changing,
they were very real at the time.
And this country (or any other, for that matter)
has never existed without struggles.
And, from the very beginning, even between St. Peter and St. Paul,
the Church has endured differences of opinion
about what it means
to be faithful and obedient servants of Jesus Christ.

Nostalgia has its appeal, to be sure,
but it is generally an exercise
in remembering what never was in the first place.

And what God seems to be urging,
certainly in today's lessons from Holy Scripture,
is for us to be a forward-striving,
rather than a nostalgic, backward-looking people.

Abraham, who figures so prominently in today's readings,
spent his life looking forward,
looking forward, as we heard from the letter to the Hebrews, by faith.
It was by faith that Abraham set out from home in the first place,
not knowing where he was going.
By faith, he stayed in that land he'd been promised
(barren though it was),
and by faith (despite the logic of the biological clock)
he awaited the birth of his descendants.

Abraham did all these things by faith, we are told,
because he considered God faithful,
God, who had made the Promises in the first place.

For starters, God promised him land, and then he promised
that he would become the father of a great nation.

Isn't it interesting that Abraham, who did look forward with great faith,
actually held as his very own
very little of God's two great promises to him?

He didn't live long enough to see the 'great nation' that he sired.
And He may have gotten to the Promised Land,
but he never, in fact, possessed it.
The only land he ever actually owned,
was the little plot he bought to bury his beloved Sarah.
In fact, Abraham never arrived in that city
whose architect and builder is God.

So in his earthly life, Abraham was destined always to be a pilgrim.
He spent his entire life looking forward, straining forward,
to what was mostly unknown, mostly unseen, mostly untouched.
Abraham the pilgrim always looked forward, but never quite arrived.

But you know what,
that's all God asked Abraham to be - a pilgrim.
God didn't ask Abraham to conquer the land,
or build a temple,
or figure out just how it would happen that
starting at age 90-something, Abraham would have more heirs
than the stars of the sky or the sands at the seashore.

Being a pilgrim - looking forward instead of backward -
was all God asked Abraham to be,
and God would take charge of the rest.

And Abraham was a pilgrim,
who lived by faith, always looking forward.
And God, we are told, was not ashamed to be called Abraham's God.
God was proud of Abraham.

At least that's how the author of the letter to the Hebrews tells the story.
By faith, Abraham did everything God asked,
and God was just thrilled to bits.

Sure sounds like a load of nostalgia to me.
How about you?
The Author of Hebrews does seem to have forgotten a few of the details.

For example, ...

Abraham didn't have faith enough, apparently,
in the promise that he'd have lots of proper heirs.
So, when he passed 80, and it looked like God had forgotten the promise,
Abraham took things into his own hands and had a child by a slave girl.

And, as we heard in today's reading, Abraham didn't have faith enough
not to demand from God some sign of the Promise.
After all, time was passing, and Abraham wanted a little proof.

So for all that Abraham did many things by faith,
Abraham also had his doubts.
He doubted that he would have an heir,
or that he would possess the land.

And frankly, that's when Abraham's story becomes my story;
that's when, I suspect, we all begin to feel some kinship
with our forbear in the faith.

Now, not many of us are called to leave home like Abraham,
without a clue about where we're going,
but like Abraham we are called to live by faith,
and especially so in this time of transition for Saint Ann's.

And, like Abraham, most of us have our doubts,
and most of us don't have faith enough
not to do what Abraham tried to do -
to take matters into our own hands.

At some level, for example,
most of us think it's up to us alone
to solve issues like health care and Middle Eastern wars.
And when our lives seem to experience a kind of 'Good Friday',
we don't really have faith enough to believe
that God will bring Easter even to the most troubled situation.
Like Abraham, we have our doubts.

But - and this is also like Abraham -
God doesn't ask us to solve all the world's problems.
What God does ask if for us, like Abraham, to be pilgrims -

forward looking pilgrims who consider God faithful to the promise.
God asks us to be pilgrims whom the master finds alert,
even at the most unexpected hour.

God asks us just to go to whatever Promised Land God chooses for us,
and to let God deal the with rest.

Like Abraham, we often don't have a clue where the Promised Land is;
we don't know where that city is
whose architect and builder is God.

But we don't have to know;
after all, we're just pilgrims.

Sometimes we Pilgrims catch a glimpse of that city,
and sometimes it disappears from sight.
Sometime we wonder if we'll ever see it again,
and sometimes we doubt if we ever saw it in the first place.
Sometimes we get turned around in the wrong direction
and look only backwards,
and forget that we are pilgrims at all.

But the builder of the city has done something about that.
The Builder hasn't left us without directions,
nor are we put on the road alone.

Not only do we have the stories of Abraham and other pilgrims
who have gone before us,
but we are also set in the company of pilgrims -
pilgrims whose faith can sustain us when our own faith grows dim.

And the very best thing about our little pilgrim band,
is that we've been joined by the Builder himself.
Jesus Christ walked His pilgrim road - all the way to Calvary,
so that He could be with us on our pilgrim road.

We have no assurance that the road will be straight,
or that we won't be wounded on the way,
but we are assured that we travel in the company of our Lord.

We pilgrims, we children of Abraham, need faith for this journey,
because to get to that city,

we have to leave the safety and comfort of this one.

For example, the city whose architect and builder is God
is a place of forgiveness and reconciling love,
and to get to that city, we have to leave anger and resentment behind.
When we're called to be apostles and evangelists,
we've got to let go of our shyness
about discussing our faith with others.
And, as stewards of God's creation and our many blessings,
we can't cling to our possessions.

When God says 'go', God always also means 'let go' -
to risk giving up what we can see and touch
for the conviction of things hoped for but not seen.
And that's when God is not ashamed to be called our God;
that's when we're the people of whom God is justly proud.

To be the pilgrims of whom God is not ashamed
is to put nostalgia in its proper place
and be willing to be molded and even transformed
by the often disruptive power of the Holy Spirit.

To be the pilgrims of whom God is proud
is always to be laboring for the in-breaking of God's Kingdom,
striving to be better stewards of our blessings,
because in that city whose architect and builder is God,
no one is poor, and no one is hungry, and no one is homeless.

To be God's pilgrim people,
is to be ever alert to the signs of God's Kingdom,
because the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

That's fearful stuff,
but as God said to Abraham, so God also says to us:
"do not be afraid, ... your reward shall be very great".
We can let go and let ourselves be sustained by God's Promise,
even if, like Abraham, we only get a glimpse in this life.
And unlike Abraham, we can believe that the One who promises is faithful,
because we know that He gave his only Son to guarantee the promise.

Jesus said to the disciples:

“do not be afraid, ... for it is your Father’s good pleasure
to give you the kingdom”.

And He lived and loved and even died that it should be so for us,
and God raised Him from death to seal the Promise.

We are God’s pilgrims;

so let’s go, and let’s let go,
because pilgrims travel light,
but we also travel in good company.

And let’s not be afraid;

let’s be forward looking people of whom God can be proud.
For God has prepared for us a city - a Kingdom -
and it is God’s good pleasure to give us the Kingdom.

Amen.

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