

⁸ By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. ⁹ By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹ And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise. ¹² And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

¹³ All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. ¹⁴ People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

-- Heb 11:8-16

“By faith, Abraham went to a place promised to him as an inheritance when he was called out—even though he had no idea where he was going.”

Before I tell you what I like about this passage, I’m going to tell you what I don’t like. What we’ve just read is part of a larger portion of Scripture that’s often called the “heroes of faith” passage because the writer of Hebrews recounts all the people who not only believed God when he told them something, but also lived like they did. And according to the writer of Hebrews, they *were* heroes. There’s no sense of doubt or fear in any of them! They get the call, they get up, and they *go*. This is the kind of biblical character a lot of us grew up with; men and women of such great faith that on a moment’s notice they’d just as soon jump into a lion’s den as believe a promise they heard whispered to them on some starry night.

Most of us start with the idea that we don’t believe enough—as though faith is some kind of gas tank you need to get filled before you start the road trip. We think “if only I had *more* faith—if only I believed as much as Abraham or Moses or that other guy whose name I can’t pronounce.” But it’s

as I grow older and become more familiar not just with myself but with Jesus that I've begun to realize that every hero has their doubts. No one's immune to fear—and if they are, they're not a hero, they're psychotic. The First Testament gives us details about each of these men and women that when you read them seem designed to lance our swollen notions of what it takes to follow the living God. Abraham never met a handmaid he didn't like. Moses was a murderer. And the other guy whose name you can't pronounce? He was just as afraid as you are—as I am.

Now that I've told you why I don't like this passage, it's time to tell you why I do. I'm more familiar with Hebrews 11 than any other chapter in this book because despite the burden of fear, in the face of a panic that sends most people running the other way, these heroes did the best they could with what they had. That, after all, is what God asks of us—not heroism, but trust. And it's this trust that makes us heroes in the life of the Kingdom of God.

Abraham's story has a special place in my heart. This isn't just because a man with a prophetic gift once told me that Hebrews 11 would be a watchword for my life, but because more than once I think I've heard God say “get up and go to the country I'll show you.” Maybe not in an audible voice or that little heart-nudge you sometimes get from the Spirit, but even by circumstances that don't quite go my way, I've heard God say “change course.”

Abraham was used to changing course. In fact, the first thing we hear about him in Genesis was that he got up from a rather comfortable life somewhere around Mesopotamia and carrying everything he owned with him, he went off to a land he'd never seen nor even heard of. Now, thanks to Sunday School we kind of cheat with Abraham's story because we *know* how it ends. We know that the land he gets into is a land flowing with milk and honey. We know that the hundred year-old man gets the ninety year-old woman pregnant. We know that a ram appears in the bushes just as

the knife hovers above his son's chest. We know all this and start thinking "well of course Abraham got up and left Ur. God worked out everything in *his* life just fine!"

Yet there wasn't any money-back guarantee when Abraham heard the Lord the first time, and there never was after that. Just "get up and go."

Ten years ago now I wasn't in a good place. I'd just finished a degree in education more out of wanting to get my mom off my back than any noble Dead Poets Society sentiment. Only thing was, the jobs I was told would be mine for the taking weren't there. I ended up substitute high school teaching—which every teacher will tell you is the equivalent of being a baby-sitter/raw sewage pipe scrubber. Life had taken a few left turns before then, and all that turning left me dizzy and disoriented.

Now, I hated Hong Kong when I was growing up. I thought the people were rude, the air polluted, the tap water undrinkable, and the quality of life to be subhuman. It was a good enough place to shop, but live? Never. Ever. No.

I spent four years in Hong Kong, going from a first year of grinding my teeth to get through the days to finding a measure of peace and even beauty in amongst the towers of concrete and glass. There was the way my room turned a rosy pink every morning when the sunrise would reflect off the apartment building across from mine. There was the way the sun would creep across my bedroom floor on lazy Saturday afternoons. And, there even was the way the crowd marched across the footbridge in unwitting synchronicity to Kylie Minogue being played *ad nauseum* over the gym's sound system.

However, I stayed in a place I vowed I'd never in for four years not because I loved the city itself, but because the people I met there made it worth loving. I began to see that despite the environments they may live in, people the world over share the same dreams and hope the same

hopes. And, just like that, the world was opened to me. When I was younger, I was ignorant of the world and of the ways God worked tirelessly for its redemption. When I came back to Vancouver six years ago, I had a glimpse of God's hand, and now needed to know how to name it.

That led me to Regent College—though the hope of going there was the reason I went into teaching in the first place. Most of you know what happened in my last year of seminary: we founded this church.

In almost every sense of the word, my time here has been *good*. You've been the best first congregation any pastor could have hoped for. We may not be big, but since when is Jesus interested in size and impressing the crowds? What we do have is the foundation for something good, and what we do here is *right*. You need to remember that, because doing right doesn't always mean you'll feel good doing it. And yet, we each need to be careful of how we respond to God, because if he calls us once to leave the familiar sights and sounds of home for a country he'll yet show us, chances are he'll do it again. Be careful when you step out your door—you'll never know where you'll be taken to next.

I knew after finishing Regent that I wanted to do more. I felt full, but incomplete, as though I'd just been on a liquid diet. Seminary can be a bit like riding a bullet train: you see the world, but at two hundred miles an hour. You leave wanting to have stopped and seen more of the quaint villages and towns along the way, but there's no time for it. You don't even end up being a tourist, you're just a passenger, flying through town on your way out to God's green earth beyond.

And yet, sometimes God *does* make the time.

I wish I could say that I've had a lifelong fascination with psychology. For most of my life, they were the throwaway courses I took to fulfill the Arts requirements of my very serious "real" Science

degree. Psychology was handy for boosting my GPA and little else. How little did I know fourteen years ago when I finished university that these courses would become the ones I'd need the most.

I'm sure from one perspective the program I'm beginning in September sounds like the product of a lot of hard work on my part. And it's true: there are a lot of people going in who have done masters level work in the field of counseling psychology and have lived, breathed, and eaten it—I'm just not one of them. This isn't false modesty. I simply don't think that I am that deserving of this open door and the path that lies beyond it.

I can say this because even though the process of taking this step in following Jesus has taken nearly a year, the groundwork for it was laid over two decades ago. It was then that my father approached my wealthy grandfather with the idea that he should set up a trust fund for the education of his grandchildren. My mom tells me that my dad returned home from that request surprised at how easily my grandfather bought into the idea. However, there wasn't any money to be had—right away, at least. It wasn't until a few years ago after untangling the labyrinthine mess of my grandfather's will that we discovered that he'd set aside a substantial sum for the education of his grandchildren. Only thing was, almost none of his grandchildren needed it anymore. None them, except perhaps me.

Now, I know what you're thinking: "*good for you. So you're mooching off your grandpa and now you're boasting about it.*" Not at all. Even after factoring in the availability of the means to go to do more school, I also had to get *in*. It's not as though I didn't study for the statistics and cognitive psych courses I've taken over the last year, and it's not as though I rolled out of bed and decided to take the GRE either. But in all of the results I've gotten, I've never thought for a moment that I necessarily deserved what I got. I still think that Jesus somehow rigged the test computer for the GRE.

Maybe it's a little clichéd to say that God is gracious, but until you show up empty-handed and say "I think I heard you say 'go this way'," and then try it out, you really don't know what grace means. Everything—and everyone—that has happened to me in the last year is an act of unmerited favour, of God simply opening doors despite my unbelief. In recent months, I've felt a lot like Peter stepping out of the boat to walk towards the Lord. That's me out on the water, holding my breath as I take each step because you never know when the water goes liquid and you'll start drowning. Part of me—not the best part of me—wonders when things will go to pot and everything will unravel. Yet every step I've taken so far has shown the water to be solid rock. Every little coincidence, every little meeting, every email, every phone call has come at just the right time. It may all just be one big coincidence, or it may be God. Gamblers speak of hitting a hot streak, but this is more than just dice or cards, this is life on the trusting edge of the Kingdom of God.

I sometimes wonder why things didn't work out the way I'd expected when I was younger. I was as much a planner back then as I am now, and when my plans went pear-shaped, I never really did get over it. Yet God in his wisdom decided that this was the cure for the worst sin that I'm guilty of: pride. If I'd had everything go my way, I wouldn't have come to the place where I am now, astounded and grateful that I should be asked to start something new.

I think that's why the Lord of the Rings resonates so deeply within me. If you know the stories, you know that the real heroes are never Aragorn or Legolas. The real heroes are always the hobbits, the little people who wander through the books in grave danger but with a strange sort of insouciance that borders on being foolish. And out of the four hobbits who leave the Shire, the one who had the least business on the quest was Frodo's groundskeeper and servant, Samwise Gamgee.

It's with Sam that I identify the most these days. Not quite the smartest nor most dangerous hobbit, Sam sort of bumbles along with his pots and pans for the majority of the books until he and

Frodo get to the worst part of the world, the land of Mordor. It's here in the land where nothing grows except thornbushes and evil that Sam's true quality shines through. It's not his exceptional swordplay nor his clever wit, but his simplicity that contributes to the cause. Sam resists the corruptive power of the Ring because he doesn't think he deserves it and he never gives up hope because he's not smart enough to see how bad things really *are*. And this is where I am: going on a journey where I'm too dumb to really know how all this shakes out—but that's probably a good thing. Although I'm hardly a hobbit clinging to life on the side of a volcano, I don't think I deserve much of anything I've received either.

Does this mean I feel carefree enough not to worry? No, I still worry—but that's because I'm still *learning* to trust God. I don't know how all this will work out. Now, one of my newer worries is whether I'll be smart enough to stay in the program once I'm down there. Yet I figure if God can get me into a program like this, he can see me through it too.

Abraham didn't have half the cushy landing spot I've got coming to me. After moving out of Ur with his wife and no children, he wandered until he and his wife were as dried up and lifeless as the desert they wandered in. And even when he reached the land God said he'd show him, he lived on the land in tents, not stone castles. He didn't have permanent dwellings—unless, of course, you count his burial cave at Machpelah. Abraham lived as though he trusted God, and that made all the difference.

I'm trying to live as though I trust God too, but it's a lot harder than it seems. I love it here in Vancouver, even if I'll probably never be able to afford a house on the west side where I grew up. I love being Canadian, because it's like being American but nicer and without guns. Yet here I go, to a place I don't really want to go but only going because this is the path God is leading me out on. Sure, it's exciting, but it's also nerve-wracking because I'm choosing to take God at his word.

That's what it boils down to—taking God at his word. When Jesus says “seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness, and all these shall be given to you as well”, he's not just suggesting it, he's inviting us: “*follow where I lead and I'll meet you there.*” This isn't just an invitation for super-saints who have unbreakable faith. This is an invitation for the not-so-saintly, for the people who openly admit they have trouble trusting God (and sometimes act like it). This is an invitation to trust God and take him at his word. And the life of the Kingdom of God is to respond to this invitation, over and over again until we become used to the idea of living in tents. Not because we like camping out, but because we realize that everything we do and everything we have here on earth is temporary. We are an eschatological people, which means that we're a people that live in anticipation of a heavenly dwelling and glorified life that will last forever. You've heard me say it many times before, but we all need to be reminded especially when we get comfortable: *this isn't your home.*

Until the time we do get to go home, we're all people on the move and in exile. Maybe we don't feel it all the time because we're at home in a city we love surrounded by people who love us, but we're aliens and strangers. It's in the little things like how we steward the money we're given or our hopes for our kids. It's in the way you and I make room and accommodate and stretch to meet each other when the world around us says “leave these losers behind—you're too good for them.” If we're living for God and his Kingdom, our lives will be filled with reminders that we live in tents. It's not bad to enjoy living in tents, but especially in this life, we need to live as though any moment we'll need to pull up our tent pegs, load up the camels, and head out of Ur.