

SERMON AT TRINITY UMC, WILMETTE, ILLINOIS

“STARS AND SAND”

August 8, 2010

TEXT: Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

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When my daughter was a little girl, she would say, “Daddy, I love you a hundred.” Playing along with her, I would say, “Katie, I love you a thousand.” Then she would raise the bar a little higher: “Daddy, I love you a million.” That’s when I would play my trump card: “Katie, I love you infinity.” That was the ultimate, I thought. But she was not finished: “Daddy, I love you infinity plus one.”

Today’s sermon is about infinity plus. It’s about the incomprehensible majesty, the immeasurable greatness of the glory of God. Our text is from Hebrews, the 11th chapter, often described as the Heroes of Faith Chapter. The word faith appears in this one chapter 24 times. But if we emphasize the greatness of the people in Hebrews 11, we are missing the point.

We need to be careful here. When we idealize the so-called superstars in the Bible, they become like Derek Rose or Kobe Bryant or LeBron James. We admire them. But we know that we could never be like them. If we played basketball with Derek or Kobe or LeBron, we would look ridiculous. They would be like Boeing 747’s; we would be like paper airplanes. They would be like Arthur Rubinstein; we would be like second-grade piano students.

What I’m saying is that if we read the Bible as a book about superstars, the stories may be entertaining, but they don’t connect with us today. Abraham? He left his home, his country, his security to follow God’s call. “I could never do that,” we say. “My faith seems ridiculously puny next to Abraham’s faith. Abraham is like the heavyweight champion of the world. Next to him I’m a 98-poung weakling.” Have you ever felt that way? That’s the danger of reading the Bible as if it were a book about religious superheroes.

It is not! The point of the Bible is not that the main characters were great. In fact, they were human beings who struggled like all of us. Why do we admire them? We admire them because they discovered that only God is great. The Bible is not about having an awesome faith. It’s about having faith in an awesome God. We don’t have to be magnificent believers. Instead, we are called to believe in a magnificent God.

Here’s another way to say it. If I wanted to cross the Atlantic Ocean in a cardboard box, I would fail. No matter how much faith I had in my cardboard box, my mission would be a disaster. I could have more faith than anyone alive, but what matters is not the quantity of my faith. What matters is the object of my faith. A cardboard box will never be adequate in the ocean. But if I trust myself to an ocean liner, let’s say the *Queen Mary*, I can be confident and safe.

So the real question is: where do we put our trust? In Hebrews 11 we see Abraham and Sarah believing in a great God. They put their trust in the only One can bear us safely across the ocean of chaos. All other gods are like cardboard boxes.

Do we have a great God? Or do we have a little dinky God? J.B. Phillips wrote a book entitled *Your God Is Too Small*. He says that most of us try to create God in our own image. But the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of Moses and Rahab and Ruth and Samuel and David, the God we claim to worship is far more than we can imagine. In the words of Paul in Romans 11: 33-37: “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are [God’s] judgments and how inscrutable [God’s] ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord?” We are talking about infinity. Or as my daughter would say, infinity plus one.

How can we grasp the infinite glory of the One who is from everlasting to everlasting? What is infinity? Imagine with me a mountain in the far north, the tallest mountain on the planet. Isolated. Undisturbed. Now imagine a little bird that appears once every thousand years. The little bird comes to sharpen its beak against the rocky surface of the mountain. How long would it take for the bird to wear down the entire mountain, sharpening its beak once every thousand years? It’s unimaginable. But if it were to happen, the entire length of time would be just one day of eternity.

Let me say it in the words of the Bible. “By faith Abraham, even though he was past age and Sarah herself was barren, [nevertheless, he] was enabled to become a father, because he considered [God] faithful . . . And 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” (vv. 11-12 NIV). “Count the stars in the sky,” God is saying. “Count the grains of sand on all the beaches of the entire world. That’s the measure of my infinite love for you.”

Abraham could have laughed in disbelief. In fact, his wife did laugh (Genesis 18:9-15). She thought it was a joke, until they both discovered that the word of God is not like a cardboard box. You can’t cross the ocean of chaos with cardboard. But by taking a small step of faith, they found that the word of God is more dependable than the *Queen Mary*.

What about us? Have we made that same discovery? Do we believe that when we are discouraged, there is a God who does not faint or grow weary? Have we come to understand that when everything seems hopeless, when we hit rock bottom, there is beneath us still the Rock of Ages?

Think about George Washington at Valley Forge. He had written to a relative: “I think the game is pretty near up.” Racked by hunger, cold, and disease, the Americans lay shivering a few miles from Philadelphia. There was nowhere to turn for reinforcements. But Washington was somehow able to trust the One who is greater than any human enemy. An eyewitness tells of seeing him in the snow, kneeling in prayer.

We don’t have to be a superstar to have that kind of faith. The point is not “Do we have a great faith?” The point is, “Do we have faith in a great God?”