Some of you have had the experience of emigrating from another country and settling in Canada. I never have, and so the only thing I know about it is what I have read or what others – some of you – have told me. Recently, Marg Swatridge gave me a few of Len’s books. Len was very big on all things military. One of the books that he had was an autobiography written by American General Colin Powell. Powell himself was not an immigrant, being born in Harlem in 1937, but his parents were. They emigrated from Jamaica, but they didn’t meet until after they arrived in America. Along with his parents, a number of their siblings also emigrated. Powell frequently refers to the very close family circle that he grew up in.

There is one paragraph early in the book that especially caught my attention. I want to read it to you, because I believe it has a bearing on our subject this morning. Powell writes:

At family gatherings, talk would invariably turn to “goin’ home”. No matter how many years my aunts and uncles had been in America, when they said home, they meant Jamaica. “Hey, Osmond, you goin’ home this year?” “No, don’t have the money. Next year, for sure.” “Hey, Laurice, you goin’ home?” “No, but I’m packin’ a barrel to send to the folks.” They would slip into nostalgia, all but my godfather, Uncle Shirley … a dining car waiter on the Pennsylvania Railroad. Uncle Shirley was Jamaican too, but in their eyes, he had gone American, even shedding much of his West Indian accent, after riding the rails for so many years with native-born blacks. “Goin’ home?” Uncle Shirley would say. “You damn fools sit around talking about ‘home.’ You forget why we left? Ain’t been home in twenty years and I ain’t never going home.” At which point the kids would laugh uproariously, delighted to see Uncle Shirley provoked to heresy. (from My American Journey by Colin Powell, page 14)

Why I chose this passage will become more apparent later in this sermon, but what we need to know right now is that the man we are going to look at in Hebrews 11:8-12 was not native to the land in which he ended up living. He was an immigrant. He had emigrated from a place called Ur of the Chaldees, which is located near the Euphrates River in present day Iraq. Today the ruins of Ur are marked by a huge structure called a ziggurat which was
built around the 21st century BC, which is somewhere near to Abraham’s time. It has been restored several times, the latest being a partial restoration of the facade by Saddam Hussein in the 1980’s. This picture on the preceding page shows US troops climbing the steps of the ziggurat in 2010. Abraham, along with his father, and other family members, left Ur and travelled to a place called Harran, which is in present day Turkey, a journey of about 600 miles. He stayed in Harran until his father Nahor died, and then he made the journey south to Schechem in the land of Canaan, a distance of about 400 miles.

Why did Abraham make the journey from Ur to Canaan? When people immigrate to a new country, they usually do so for a number of reasons:
1. They are looking for better job and living opportunities;
2. They may be sent by the company they work for to fill a job position;
3. They may feel the move will give their children a better chance for a future;
4. There may be political or social unrest in their country of origin;
5. They may want to be closer to family members who have already made a move; or
6. If they are like one of my grandfathers, they are being hounded by bill collectors and figure they better skedaddle before they get hauled into court.

The reason for Abraham’s decision to emigrate was a little unusual. Hebrews 11:8 says that 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.** Abraham made his decision to go to Canaan based on a call. God called him to become a pilgrim and journey to a new country which was promised to him as his inheritance. When he received that call, Abraham obeyed and went. Genesis 12:5 tells us that **He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan.** So his decision was an act of obedience to God. He could have said no and stayed where he was, but then he would have lost his inheritance and today no one would even know that such a man existed.

Abraham is probably the one who is applauded for his faith more than any other Old Testament character mentioned in the New Testament. So it is understandable that the writer of Hebrews gives more space to Abraham and his wife Sarah than to any other individual in his list of pilgrims and pioneers. Now, when you think about it, the obedience of this man was incredible. Personally, I like to know where I am going when it comes time to make a move. When Susan was transferred to Mississauga, we knew where we were going. This part of Ontario was familiar territory to both of us. We looked at the move as an adventure, and in many ways it seemed like we were coming home.
Mind you, Susan was coming to a job. I didn’t know what I was coming to and wouldn’t know for five months. But at least we knew the area. Abraham was not given a destination. He just answered God’s call. He went out, knowing that it was right to go, but not knowing where he would end up. Even after he arrived in Canaan, it was some time before God informed him that this was the land that was to be given to Abraham’s descendants. It was later still that God said, 14 “Look around from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and west. 15 All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever.” (Genesis 13:14-15). To leave everything that you know and to go out into the unknown – relying on nothing but the promise of God – is the essence of faith. That’s why this section of Hebrews 11 begins with the powerful phrase that we looked at last week, By faith Abraham!

Now, even after he arrived in Canaan, Abraham did not have the luxury of being able to say, “OK, finally we have arrived. This is home.” We see this when we move on to the next verse in Hebrews. 9 By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents. I want to stress to you the impermanence of Abraham’s presence in Canaan. He left behind a permanent home in Ur and traded that for the impermanence of a tent. After leaving Ur, I expect that he lived in a tent for the rest of his life. Tents are fine, but a tent is a temporary structure with a limited shelf life. This arrangement did not last just for Abraham’s lifetime. It went on for generations. His descendants, Isaac and Jacob, continued to live in these temporary structures right up until they went to Egypt during Joseph’s time. Only then did they move back into permanent homes with doorposts and thresholds. In fact, to the end of his life, the only piece of Canaan that Abraham actually owned was the burial plot that he purchased when his wife Sarah died (see Genesis 23). I never thought of this, but in Acts 7:5 it makes the point, God gave him no inheritance here, not even enough ground to set his foot on. He was truly a stranger and a foreigner. He became a wealthy man, but he just lived with his family and servants and all their flocks amidst a people who did not share his beliefs, language or values. He was truly a stranger in a foreign country.

I wonder if Abraham ever thought about going home. I expect Sarah did. After a while, she probably concluded that this whole journey was just a wild goose chase. She had heard all the promises, but where was the reality? As far as she could see, God made the promises but they were never fulfilled. If God promised them this country as an inheritance, then why weren’t they living in a permanent village like all their neighbours? Why didn’t they own one square inch of this land? And where were these descendants that were going to be as numerous as the stars of the heavens and as the grains of sand on the seashore? Why, she even laughed in God’s face when he told her – she who was barren and couldn’t have children, and was an old woman to boot – that she would have a child. No, I expect that more than once, Sarah thought about going home. “Next year, Abraham; next year I’m going to go back home to see my family. Enough of
this “promised land” cock and bull story. I’m sick and tired of living in a tent. I’m going to climb on the Damascus Express and I’m going home to Paddan Aram.” And what do you think Abraham said in response? I expect his response was a bit like Colin Powell’s Uncle Shirley. “You fool, Sarah. You are sitting around here talking about ‘home.’ You forget why we left, woman? Ain’t been home in forty years and I ain’t never going home.”

Basically, I believe that Abraham would have said, “You forget why we left? We left because God called us to leave. And I believe that promise, Sarah. I am going to stake my future and the future of my family on the promises of God. Even if I have to live out the rest of my life like a stranger in a foreign country in a tent, I ain’t never goin’ home!”

There are some things that people who have no faith just don’t understand about people who do. They don’t understand why we do the things we do, why we believe the things we believe and why we take the risks that we do. In about 1958, my Dad, who was working for Avro Aircraft at the time, went on a sales trip around South America with one of the other sales engineers from the company. They flew right around the perimeter of that continent and visited every country. One of the things that Dad got to do on that trip was to visit various mission agencies in the different countries. I don’t remember the country exactly, but it was either in Brazil or Ecuador that he visited the little head office of a mission agency and he took the other salesman, who was not a Christian, with him. He said that the director had a huge map on the wall of the area where the mission operated. As the director explained to Dad and this man just what the mission was doing in the various areas, he also pointed out a number of places where missionaries had been killed trying to work with hostile tribes. At one point, the other salesman said, “You mean you have actually had people that you sent into these areas killed? You people are crazy. You couldn’t pay me enough to go in there.” The mission director turned to him and said, “You don’t know the God we serve.”

You see, if you don’t know the God of Abraham, then you will never understand how on the basis of simple faith in God’s Word, he could make the choices that he did and choose to live the rest of his life as a stranger in a foreign country. Neither Abraham nor Sarah were perfect people, but when it came down to the crunch, they trusted God. That’s why it says in verse 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. What was the end result of their faith? 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.

If it had not been for the faith of Abraham, the Jewish people would never have come into existence. If it hadn’t been for the faith of Abraham, we wouldn’t be here this morning. The Apostle Paul said of Abraham, he is the father of all who believe. That includes all of us. But that still maybe doesn’t answer the question as to why he was willing to live his life in a tent. That is to be found in verse 10. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. You see, even the best built structure is only temporary. We may think that the pyramids are good examples of permanent structures, but in God’s eyes they are only temporary. Like the kingdoms they represent, they will also one day pass from this earthly scene. In a sense, it doesn’t make any difference whether you live in a tent, a palace or a house designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. Like our lives, these buildings are only temporary and will one day be no more, when God establishes a new heaven and a new earth. The question is: “Are you going to build for time or for eternity?” Abraham chose eternity. There is only one permanent city, and that is the city of God. Abraham looked for a city that had a true foundation, a true architect and a true builder; a city whose builder and maker is God.

What are you going to choose? The Apostle Paul, in Romans 8:18 said, I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. If that is true of our sufferings in this life, then will it not also be true of the pleasures of this life? They are nothing when compared to what God has prepared for those who by faith have chosen to live for him. I pray that during this season of Lent, we will make choices that will set us on the same path that Abraham walked, the path of faith in the goodness and trustworthiness of our God.

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