

WGUMC August 11, 2019 “Following Joe”
Hebrews 11:1-3; 8-16

On Friday, I was going to visit someone who just had surgery, so I got in the car and without thinking drove to the wrong hospital. I went to Kaiser Santa Clara, where I always go, instead of Kaiser San Jose. Goes to show you how easy it is to operate on autopilot and end up going in the opposite direction of where we want to go. I guess that’s why Jesus was always telling his disciples, “Follow me.” Because in this life we need a pilot car to make sure we get there safely.

For me, the verb “to follow” is just the verbal form of the noun “faith.” Just look at Jesus. When you put faith into motion you get a following. It goes without saying that if we want to follow Jesus, we have to have faith. But what exactly is faith?

Our scripture this morning is the only time in the Bible when faith is defined for us. The author of Hebrews says, “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” A faithful life is shaped by hope, so why is it that we let fear drive so

many of our decisions? How much better off would we be if we let our faith rather than our fear sit in the driver's seat!

Faith frees us from fear because it gives us an assurance that no matter what kind of crazy is going on right now, *God's* hope for us will one day be fulfilled. (Notice that I said *God's* hope, because we do have a tendency to hope for a lot of things that we shouldn't have and that God has no intention of giving to us.) But we can have an assurance that God's hope will be fulfilled in us, and that's what gives us an ability to live in the not-yet, otherwise known as the kingdom come.

The author goes on to say, "By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God." And our first thought is: "Not *this* world, surely!" And that is correct. The world that has been prepared by the word of God is not this world of hate, but the not-yet world of hope. I say "not-yet" because most of the time, we can't see it, but it is here. And in spite of everything, we can live in it if we have faith.

Like the old hymn goes, we can “stand on the promises,” because faith gives us a hope-shaped world where the poor are blessed, the mournful are comforted, the meek inherit the earth, the hungry and thirsty are filled with righteousness, the merciful receive mercy, the pure in heart see God, the peacemakers are called children of God, and the persecuted and reviled are rewarded with the kin-dom of heaven. [Matthew 5:3-12]

Tragically, that is not the world the Building Hope team came back to last weekend. I had heard about the Gilroy shooting while I was in Mexico, but I hadn't heard that Roxanne had been caught up in it. Then we got back to news of the shooting in El Paso. But I was caught off guard in the middle of prayer time last Sunday because I hadn't yet heard about Dayton. Made me want to go back to Tijuana where I felt safer!

In Tijuana I saw more hope than I could see here. Yes, I saw people living in shacks, building shelters in the right-of-way out of bits of cardboard, plastic tarps and sheet metal. I saw stray dogs

scratching at fleas. I saw loads of trash and smelled it burning in the air. The haze and stench were everywhere.

But I also saw people smiling and laughing while going to work, caring for their children, and shopping at the market. I drove a big awkward cargo van through rush-hour traffic not knowing where I was going and no one honked at me, no one flipped me off. And everywhere people were doing something or selling something, trying to make a better future for themselves and their family. I saw hope alive and faith in action.

And I felt safe in a big, strange city because I was following Joe. Joe was our construction supervisor and our escort to and from the work site each day. Since I was driving van #1, I was often right behind him, and I started driving like a native so I could stay behind him. Some of the vans got separated from Joe when they got caught at red lights. But Joe would always pull over and wait for the other vans to catch up. Reminded me of that passage in Romans. Joe was like Jesus, making sure that nothing in all of Tijuana (not

red lights, not big trucks, not police checkpoints, not confusing street signs or highway merges) absolutely nothing was going to separate us from the love of God that was guiding us in that Amor pickup with the two-by-four propped up in the back. [Romans 8:38-39]

The truth is that even those who had been on the mission trip before didn't know where we were going. Previous work sites had been closer to base camp. Not this one. We were clear across town, and on that first day, we all felt like Abraham who set out not knowing where he was going. Now Abraham went because he was called by God and that calling came with a promise: Go to the land that I will give you as an inheritance. So, as we set out for our work site, I wondered what would be our inheritance? What would we take back from this experience?

The author of Hebrews tells us that Abraham stayed for a time in a foreign land, living in tents. We did that, too, though the

planning team made sure that our outdoor living was quite comfortable.

Our text also says that Abraham, living in a tent, “looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” And I say, good thing God is a builder, because some team members, like me, had very few building skills to offer.

But no matter how much expertise or experience you have, you are going to encounter some new challenge every time you go to Mexico. Before we even got out of San Jose, we had people drop out for various reasons, leaving us shorter staffed than we had hoped. We also had to figure in the commute time, two-and-a-half to three hours per day that we were traveling and not working, which really had an impact on how much we could reasonably get done in a day. And we had some surprises: concrete under the dirt we were trying to dig into; a mis-measured wall; not enough room to sort the piles of sand and rock for the concrete; and on my site, only one really good saw.

Every morning, I read aloud a Scripture verse before we piled into vans. The first morning, I offered this from Psalm 127: “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.”

Thankfully, the architect and builder of our Building Hope team was God, so we did not labor in vain. By God’s grace, everything went smoothly. No one got seriously injured. No one got lost. None of the vans broke down. Both of our teams worked well together and because our sites were so close, we could help each other.

And when we got stuck, we could always call on Joe. Whatever the question was, the answer was, “I don’t know; ask Joe.” Joe was a wonderful leader. I asked him how he came to work for Amor, and he told me that he had been living in San Diego, working in construction, when a friend who had signed up for an Amor trip had to back out and asked him to take his place. Joe had been feeling a call to ministry, and he answered it in Tijuana.

I hope that our team members came back from Mexico with this inheritance: the inspiration to follow Joe and to listen to the

calling of Jesus in their own lives. We didn't build the kin-dom of God in Tijuana, but we could see it from a distance. We were building on a hilltop. (In Tijuana, the nicer houses are on the flat and the poor live on the hillsides, opposite of the way we build here.) From that viewpoint, I looked out across the city to a mountain on the other side of the valley. Near the peak, large white stones spelled out the words, "Jesuchristo es el Señor." [Jesus Christ is Lord]

Hebrews says, "All of these [the patriarchs] died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them." Tijuana is a far cry from the kin-dom of God, but from a distance, we could read the promise: Jesuchristo es el Señor.

So whether or not you have ever been on a mission trip, I want to know: What are you seeing in the distance? What is the hope to which God is calling you? [Eph 1:18] What is the not-yet in the world that God wants you to embrace and to embody in your own life? You don't have to go to Tijuana to know that Jesus Christ is Lord. He wants you to follow him right here.

Coming home from a mission trip is always disorienting, even without mass shootings. Home doesn't quite feel the same anymore. I'm probably not the only one who came back to Silicon Valley feeling like Abraham and Sarah, "strangers and foreigners on the earth." Following Jesus by following Joe brought me to the realization that like Abraham, I am—we are—seeking a homeland, and it's a shock to learn that this isn't it. I love this nation, but the events of this past week only intensify the desire for "a better country" where God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

While we wait, we try to be faithful. But when we follow Jesus, we are bound to feel more and more like immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, crossing any border we come to looking for a better life, searching for faith and freedom in God's country.

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. So faith enables us to catch a glimpse of that better country. Not only that, but faith invites us to live as if it were already here. Having faith and following Jesus makes us dual citizens

who have mastered the art of living in two worlds at once. There is the hate-drenched world that the Mexico team so rudely returned to last week. But there is also the hope-shaped world that was lovingly prepared for us by the word of God. That hope is our home, and that is what, with God's help, we are building here.

I'm glad that not everyone went off to Mexico because there is so much building hope work to do here. To any one of our neighbors who is afraid of what has been happening or where our nation is heading, to anyone who has lost hope or given up on faith, to anyone who feels like a stranger or a foreigner even though they've lived here a long time, to anyone who for whatever reason doesn't feel wanted or accepted or safe, to anyone who is following Jesus but getting weary, to anyone who wants to join us in seeking a better country, a more heavenly one, we are here to say, "Welcome home."