

OUR ANCHOR WITHIN THE VEIL

SERIES: CHRIST BEFORE US

Hebrews 6:13-20

16th Message

Bernard Bell

March 3, 2024

It was a dark and stormy night. We've had a few of these lately! The Tahoe area has them this weekend. When the storms hit we hope that our roofs are secure and won't leak. We hope that trees won't be uprooted, but stay firmly anchored in the ground. High winds and downed trees have caused multiple widespread power outages for most of us over the past year or two. In every high and stormy gale we hope to stay safe and secure, even if by candlelight.

The apostle Paul endured many dark and stormy nights and days. His high and stormy gale lasted two full weeks. He was being taken under military escort from Judea to Rome, there to appeal to Caesar. His ship was struck by a ferocious storm and driven helplessly across the high seas. Luke gives a vivid, detailed, and lengthy description of the storm and the resultant shipwreck (Acts 27).

In the middle of the fourteenth night the sailors sensed they were nearing land. Now there was a new danger, that they would be dashed to pieces against the rocks. So they dropped not just one but four anchors from the stern of the ship, and they longed for daylight.

Earlier this year I worked through Luke's fascinating account in close detail. This was not just idle curiosity on my part. In May, 42 of us will follow in Paul's footsteps for the final part of his journey to Rome, beginning on the island of Malta. There we will visit the traditional site of the shipwreck.

Paul was on a ship bringing grain from Egypt to Rome. These were the largest ships of the day. I learnt that each ship carried several massive anchors for emergency use. These had a cross-beam of lead that could weigh several tons. So great was the emergency facing Paul's ship that the sailors lowered four of these heavy anchors, hoping to keep the ship from the rocks. Several of these lead beams have been found near the site.

So, anchors have been much on my mind for the past two months.

One of the earliest Christian symbols is the anchor. Many depictions of anchors have been found in the catacombs on the outskirts of Rome. Sometimes the anchor is combined with other Christian symbols such as fish or a cross.

The anchor is an obvious symbol of safety and security. In Christian use it is a symbol of hope. The image is used in the well-known hymn that begins "My hope is built on nothing less..." "In every high and stormy gale, my anchor holds within the veil." This imagery comes from today's passage, Hebrews 6:13-20. The preacher of Hebrews connects the anchor motif to Jesus's ministry as high priest, which is the main point of his written sermon.

Earlier the preacher wrote that Jesus "was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek" (5:10). Rather than immediately give an exposition of this high-priesthood of Jesus, he switched to exhortation (5:11-6:12), which we've covered in my last three sermons. He ended that exhortation with a call "to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised" (6:12).

Who are these people who through faithful perseverance and persevering faithfulness inherit the promises? Exhibit A is Abraham. The preacher uses the example of Abraham to begin a transition back to where he left off in 5:10, back to Jesus as high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

I. Abraham (13-15)

Divine promise and fulfillment were exemplified in Abraham:

When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself, saying, "I will surely bless you and give you many descendants." And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised. (Heb 6:13-15 NIV)

God's promise to Abraham is of fundamental importance in the Biblical narrative, in the whole history of redemption. It kicks off the storyline into which we are incorporated when we come to Christ. Why is this promise to Abraham so important?

When God created the first humans, he commanded and enabled them to fill the world with people. He placed them in his sanctuary, the Garden of Eden, there to live in his presence. But due to human disobedience God expelled them from the garden. They filled the earth with evil and violence. So God wiped the earth clean with the Flood, and started again, this time with Noah and his three sons: "Be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth." They did: the sons of Shem, Ham, and Japheth spread out across the earth, by their clans and languages, in their lands and nations—70 nations in all. But people resisted scattering, and gathered together to build a tower to heaven, the Tower of Babel.

So a second time, God began over again. He couldn't wipe the earth clean again with a Flood, for he had made a covenant never to do so again. He did something different. He took one person from that wicked society and called him to leave everything behind. He made him a promise:

The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

**"I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;**

**I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.**

**I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;**

**and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you." (Gen 12:1-3)**

The rest of the Bible is the fulfillment of this promise. Yet the likelihood of fulfillment seemed remote. Abram and his wife were both old: Abram was 75, Sarai 65. She was barren; she had no child. The raw material God had to work with, this old couple, was *not* promising. Nevertheless God made a promise. He committed himself to

transform Abram into a new people in the midst of the existing 70 peoples, and through him to restore blessing to a world that was in rebellion against him.

Abram obeyed God and journeyed to Canaan, where God made another promise to give his descendants that land. This of course assumed that the promise of descendants would be fulfilled.

“And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised.” But it was not an easy wait. It was a long wait, full of ups and downs.

Some years later, as we heard in our Scripture reading (Gen 15:1-6), God told him, “I am your very great reward.” But Abram reminded God, “what can you give me since I remain childless? ... You have given me no children.” God invited him to look up and count the stars: “So shall your offspring be.” He repeated the promise.

Abram responded in faith: he “believed the LORD and he credited it to him as righteousness” (15:6). Abram took God at his word. He accepted that the Lord was reliable and trustworthy, that he would do what he said he would do, that he would fulfill the promise. However unlikely this seemed. Even though he could see no way it would happen. God equated this response of faith with righteousness. It was the right response within the relationship between the Lord and Abram. The Lord’s righteousness lay in doing what he said he would do. It meant being faithful to his word and to his character. Abram’s righteousness lay in completely trusting that God would do what he said he would do.

Ten years after arriving in the land, when she was 75 and Abram 85, Sarai lost patience in waiting. She gave Abram her maidservant Hagar who bore him a son. At last, aged 86, he was Father Abram. But Ishmael was not the son of promise. Nevertheless, the Lord would bless Ishmael and his descendants. From them came the Arab peoples. Muslims trace themselves back through Ishmael to Abraham; thus Islam is one of the Abrahamic faiths. Ramadan, the Muslim holy month, begins next Sunday. Muslims will be particularly sensitive to spiritual matters. I invite you to come on Wednesday evening to hear from Fouad Masri, founder of Crescent Project, how to love our Muslim neighbors. Not all Arabs are Muslims. There are many Arab Christians. There are many Palestinian Christians. These have been grafted into Abraham’s line through Isaac by faith.

Thirteen years later, when Abram was 99, the Lord repeated his promise, and this time made a covenant that he would be God to him and his offspring forever. This covenant was sealed by circumcision of all males. He changed Abram’s name to Abraham, “father of a multitude.” He also changed Sarai’s name to Sarah, “princess.” He announced that the promised son would be born the next year. “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” (18:14).

Finally, “Sarah... bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him” (21:2). “And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised.” He was 100. He had been waiting for 25 years. His waiting was over. Or was it?

Some years later God tested Abraham. What a test it was! The Lord gave him a new command, one with similar features to the original call:

“Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.” (Gen 22:2)

How could this be? Surrender the fulfilled promise back to the Lord? Give back the long-awaited gift? But Isaac was only the first part of the promise. He was the promised son, but if he died there

would be no great nation from him. But Abraham did so; he was faithful and obedient, as he had been at the beginning.

Most of you know the rest of the story. Christians call it the Sacrifice of Isaac. Jews call it the Akedah, the Binding. The account is full of pathos, of wrenching emotion that pulls on the heart strings. We read this almost-unbearable conversation between son and father:

“Father?”

“Yes, my son?”

“The fire and wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?”

“God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.”

And the two of them went on together. (Gen 22:7-8)

God would provide. How, he did not know. But Abraham was faithful and obedient. And God did provide, but not until the very last moment, when Abraham had knife in hand. God stopped him: “Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son” (22:12).

Abraham called the place *Yhwh Yireh*, “The LORD Will Provide.” Or Jehovah Jireh, as many of us grew up knowing the name. Then the Lord repeated the promise, this time swearing an oath:

“I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore...and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.” (Gen 22:16-18)

The preacher quotes from the Greek translation: “I will surely bless you and I will surely multiply you.” The promise was not just for a son but for a numerous people.

It had been perhaps 35 years since God first called Abraham. His faith had wavered at times. Now it was unshakeable. Abraham trusted God to the extreme. He considered God to be utterly reliable. And so he became the paragon of faithfulness, the model for God’s people to imitate. After waiting patiently, he had received what was promised.

The apostle Paul also presents Abraham as the exemplar of faith. He believed in “the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not... being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised” (Rom 4:17, 21).

2. Oaths (16-18)

The next paragraph (6:16-20) is a single, complex sentence in the original, far beyond the tolerance of English readers! We’ll break it into two sections.

First the preacher elaborates on the theme of oaths:

People swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument. Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us may be greatly encouraged. (6:16-18)

In an ideal world people’s every word would be trustworthy and

reliable. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, “do not swear an oath at all” (Matt 5:34). Instead our word should be straightforward and true. In the parallel passage at the end of Matthew he chastised the scribes and Pharisees for their hypocritical use of oaths, by which they tried to weasel out of their verbal commitments (Matt 23:16-22).

We don't live in an ideal world where every word is reliable and true. And so in certain situations people are required to take an oath and then give sworn testimony. “Do you solemnly swear that you will tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth? So help me God!” Usually the person taking the oath is required to place a hand on the Bible or some other sacred book that is considered to be a superior authority. An oath confirms what is said, so that there can be no dispute. False testimony under oath is perjury, often a more serious offense than the original case.

The OT contains numerous oaths. Even God took an oath. His word is always reliable and true. He doesn't need to bind himself by an oath to ensure he speaks truth. He is truth. It is impossible for him to lie. It is impossible for him to be false. He is not devious with his words. He does not mislead. He does not overpromise and underdeliver.

Satan, the adversary, is the complete opposite, as Jesus told the Jewish leaders. He likened them to the devil, who is “not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44). Satan's native language is falsehood, deception, lies, subterfuge. His speech flows from his character.

God's native language is truth and integrity. His speech also flows from his character. He needs no oath to bind himself to truth. Why then did he bind himself with an oath? He did so for *us*. He did so for two reasons.

His first reason for the oath is to demonstrate very clearly, beyond a shadow of doubt, as if in a court of law, the unchanging nature of his purpose. He demonstrates this to *us*, to all who are inheriting the promise. His purpose is to incorporate a vast people into this promise. His purpose is that the children of Abraham, born according to promise, fill the world, as the stars fill the sky and the sand fills the seashore. He bound himself with an oath so that all who are inheriting the promise will have unshakeable confidence in God, that what he said he will do, he will do. He wants us to have the same faith as Abraham.

The second reason for the oath attached to the promise is so that we have strong encouragement and comfort. We have fled for refuge from the coming storm, from judgment at the end of this age. In the OT, when the Israelites entered the land under Joshua, God designated six cities of refuge to which people might flee. In the psalter God is often described as our refuge, a stronghold in time of trouble.

Earlier, in his first warning passage, the preacher warned, “How shall we escape [from just punishment] if we ignore so great a salvation?” (2:3). How shall we flee if we leave it too late? We flee *from* that coming judgment. We flee *towards* safety and salvation. When we flee to Christ for refuge we become heirs of promise: “If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal 3:29).

In our flight we grab hold of the hope that is laid out before us, as if grabbing a rope that stretches into the future. And our confidence in God's irrevocable purpose gives us strong encouragement to keep holding on to that rope, to keep holding on to hope. We need regular encouragement because the storms will hit. When they

do we will be tempted to doubt the reliability of God and of his purpose. Tempted to doubt that he will do what he said he will do. Tempted to lose hope. Tempted to let go of the rope.

What is our refuge? What rope do we hold on to when the storms hit? It is hope that marks the path forward all the way to the fulfillment of the promise.

3. Hope (19-20)

Finally the preacher elaborates on this theme of hope:

We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek. (6:19-20)

Hope serves as an anchor for our very being. It is firm and secure, well dug in. It will not give way; it will not come loose. This anchor enters within the veil, it passes through the curtain into the space beyond. This veil divided the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place in the tabernacle and later the temple. The tabernacle was God's dwelling place in the midst of his people. But access was restricted. A screen at the entrance of the courtyard excluded the people. A screen at the entrance to the tent excluded priests except those with duties inside. The veil excluded everyone, except once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest went through the veil. There within the veil he sprinkled blood on the lid of the ark of the covenant to cleanse himself, the people, and the camp from sin and impurity, so that God could continue to dwell among his people. The sacred geography of the tabernacle was one of both embrace and exclusion.

But now our hope enters into the inner sanctum, into God's very presence. There it is firmly anchored and will not move. An anchor only works if something is attached to it, usually a ship or a boat attached by a rope or a chain. We are at the other end of that rope. We are firmly tethered to that anchor that is set within the veil.

Jesus our forerunner has already entered into that space. He remained faithful through every high and stormy gale throughout his life, and especially through his last dark night when he was betrayed, arrested, forsaken, tried, and sentenced. He was faithful, and is now the paradigm of faithful endurance.

God himself provided the Lamb. He did not withhold his Son, his one and only, whom he loved, Jesus. But gave him up for us all. Vindicated in resurrection and ascension, Jesus has passed through the veil into God's presence. His admission into that space is as high priest according to the order of Melchizedek. Here the preacher has brought us back to his main point: Jesus as high priest. In due course we will learn that he has taken with him into the inner sanctum his own blood to sprinkle for purification from sin.

Our anchor there inside the veil is hope: the sure and certain hope that if we keep holding on to the rope Jesus will pull us towards the anchor. He will pull us to himself. For the anchor is Jesus.

What is your anchor? Is it set in this world? Or is it Jesus within the veil? There are many things in this world that we can anchor ourselves to. It could be to health, or wealth, or prosperity. It could be to family, especially children and their success. It could be to work with financial success or promotion. It could be to our own significance. There are so many things that may be good in and of themselves, but are inadequate as anchors. In high and stormy gales they do not hold. They fail and give way.

Abraham's faith gave way on several occasions. Fearful for his life,

he passed his wife Sarah off as his sister—not once but twice. He heeded his wife's plan to bear a surrogate son through Hagar. But by the end of his spiritual odyssey of 35 years or so he had an unshakeable faith in God and in his word. His faith was firmly anchored in God.

I know some of you are weathering high and stormy gales. Some are in serious ill health, or facing alarming medical news. Some have major family issues. Your security has been rocked. Our hope which is Jesus is the only anchor strong enough to hold us through the fiercest storms.

Another symbol used by the early church was the boat or ship. The main space of a traditional church building is called the nave because it is like an upturned ship (Lat. *navis*). The whole church is in the boat together. Jesus himself is not in the boat; he is within the veil. In the imagery of Hebrews he is the anchor to which the boat is securely tethered. As we make our pilgrimage through life, we will be beset by storms and tempests. We are not alone. We are all together in the boat as the body of Christ. We care for one another. We love one another. We encourage one another to remain faithful. We encourage one another to not lose hope. God's Spirit is present

with us in the boat. And our boat is firmly anchored to Jesus, who is within the veil, where he serves as our merciful and faithful high priest.

Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (4:16)

Though the boat may be tossed around by the storms it will be secure. As long as we hold on to the rope, anchored to our hope, anchored to Jesus. He will bring us safely home. In every high and stormy gale, our anchor holds within the veil.

So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast... May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word. (2 Thess 2:15-17)

© 2024 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino