

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Last week I invited you to ponder your life
and examine where God had blessed you.

This week I'd like to take you on a little journey;
a journey of faith,
a journey to a little piece of heaven.

I'm bringing you on this journey
because our scriptures this morning are all about Faith.

In Genesis, Abram, not yet Abraham,
has been on his journey from his homeland for over three chapters.

He is beginning to wonder if he has made the right decision.

The word of God and a sky full of stars come together to restore his faith.

Jesus and Paul are also talking about faith
and I have some things

that I would like to add on that topic.

That's why I want to bring you along on this journey.

I think there's no better way to look at faith
than through the metaphor of journey.

Faith is often described in the Bible in terms of journey.

The Old Testament is full of journeys;

Adam and Eve leaving the garden,

Noah's flood cruise,

Abram being called to journey from his home,
to a land that would be shown to him,

Joseph's journey to Egypt,

the Exodus journey back to the promised land,
and the exile to Babylon

just to name a few.

The New Testament gives us Jesus' journey to Jerusalem

and Paul's many missionary journeys to Asia Minor, Greece and Rome.



Today I want to take you on a journey of my own. A journey to the island of my heart.

I know this island may have appeared in some of my sermons before,

and I can guarantee this won't be the last visit,

but today I want to share the island as an icon of faith.

The island is Isle Royale, a national park in the middle of Lake Superior.

Bev and I have been there backpacking multiple times in the past,

dragging a High School Youth Group around the island

in search faith and community.

As I pondered the lessons for this week

images of the island kept floating up in my thoughts.

At first I thought it was just me distracted by daydreaming,

but then I realized it might be something more

and so I've decided to bring you all along.

This morning I am going to take you from this church in the middle of Missouri,

on an imaginary trip to an island you have probably never visited before.

It is a place of wild beauty,

a place far away from the pressures and distractions of everyday life,

a place of peace.

On the way we will be learning about faith.



The first thing to know about our trip is that we will be backpacking.

What that means is that everything we need

must be carried on our backs from camp to camp.

Food, shelter, clothing....everything.

Packing for a backpacking trip

involves a very close examination
of everything you want to take with you.

One can only carry so much
and so it is important to pack only the things you will need.
Each item's potential benefit is compared against its weight.

Every mistake results in the penance
of carrying that mistake for the whole trip.

No one does it right the first time without a lot of help.

To really know what you need to pack
and what you need to leave at home
comes from experience.

So too it is with the journey of faith.

Much of what we think is crucial to our faith at the start
ends up being needless luxury that we drag along and never use.

But the only way to find out is to go out and test your faith.

To use it and rely on it!

And that can be frightening.

The decision to make a journey of faith,
to voluntarily put your faith to the test,
takes...well faith. And courage as well.

And when it comes to courage, a little goes a long way.

Jesus tells his followers, his disciples,

“Do not be afraid, little flock,
for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”

At the beginning of the journey
it is good to have at least a glimpse of the destination.

Faith can give us that glimpse when our eyes or our hearts fail.



With our packs packed we load them into the van and head north.
The drive takes us through the fields of northern Missouri and Eastern Iowa,
across the Mississippi and the rolling moraines of southern Wisconsin,
then on to the lakes of northern Wisconsin
and through the iron hills of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.

The smooth roads carved out of the land
shield us from the changes going on around us.

We are going to the wilderness.

As the land changes and gets more rugged,
so too our thoughts turn to the time ahead.

The weather is warm and sunny,
but that can change very quickly up here.

The trail will be up and down, over rock and through bog.

Will we be up to it?



When we are young, we tend to see the faith journey
as a steady increase of faith,
building on experiences learned,
like walking up a gentle slope.

But anyone who has traveled much on foot
knows more about true journeys of faith.

It's not like driving on the interstate
with mileage well marked out
and exits and on-ramps labeled and well lit.

As Jesus tells his followers, "Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit."
On a journey of faith you never know what might be coming next.



At last we arrive at Houghton,
a town clinging to the side of the hill that surrounds the harbor below.

Below we see our boat the Ranger 3 tied up along the pier,
it's light blue and white colors contrasting
with the deep blue of Lake Superior in the distance.

Tonight we will rest, for the boat leaves early in the morning
for it's 5 hour journey to Isle Royale.

There is something magical about going to sea,
even if the sea is only an inland lake, albeit the largest in the world.

In the dull light of early morning
the Ranger 3 pulls out into the long narrow harbor
and heads for Lake Superior.

The wind is calm and the water is smooth
as we slowly head for the mouth of the harbor.

Before we even get there, however,
the chill of the great lake cools the air around us
and we are surrounded by a blanket of fog.

Land and horizon are both lost in the moist white mist that surrounds us
as the engines throttle up to cruising speed.

Stories of shipwrecks on the lake come unbidden to mind.

Shouldn't we be going slower?

A glance up to the bridge reveals the captain calmly leaning on the rail
and sipping from a cup of coffee
as the helmsman maintains a steady course through the fog.

Above them on the mast a small radar antenna spins,
and above that every so often, a scrap of blue sky appears.



“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for,
the conviction of things not seen.”

A trip across Lake Superior in the fog is truly an exercise in faith.

For the crew of the Ranger 3 today's trip is nothing special.

Oh, I am sure there are trips when the weather isn't so cooperative
when even their faith is tested.

But for those of us who have never done this kind of thing before
it is unsettling.



With no horizon,
even the gentle rolling of the smooth lake
is enough to set stomachs on edge.

It may not be full blown seasickness, but all of us are a bit queasy.

This too is part of a journey of faith.

To get to a new place in your faith,
there will be times when you will find yourself lost in the fog,
when the horizon that always told you which way was up
is lost from view.

And you will be forced to rely on new horizons of faith.

This is when faith grows, when it becomes stronger and more stable.

The first time you lose your bearings it is terrifying,

but the next time the fog descends over you it's not quite so bad,
and eventually, like the crew of the Ranger 3,
you learn how to function in the fog and get through it.



A drop in the speed of the engines tells us that we are arriving at the island.

Out of the fog comes a spit of rock with cedar trees clinging to it,
and then a lighthouse.

As the Ranger 3 enters Rock Harbor the fog begins to lift
and by the time she is tied up alongside the pier
it is a forgotten memory.

As the packs are unloaded each hiker comes forward to claim their load.

Boots are laced up,

packs are slung onto backs,
and shoulder straps and belts are snugged up tight
as all is made ready for the five mile hike to our first camp.
As we head down the trail and leave Rock Harbor behind,
the sounds of civilization, such as they are, slowly fade.
So too our own voices fall silent
as the effort of hiking up and down the ridges
begins to make conversation a needless distraction.
As the weight of the pack begins to make its presence felt,
one can't help but review the contents
and the list of luxuries to be left behind next time slowly grows.
One might also begin to question the wisdom of the whole adventure
as aches and pains grow more distinct.
This reexamination becomes an almost constant activity during the first day.



The journey of faith too has these times of testing.
In our reading from the Letter to the Hebrews,
the author recalls how Abrahams faith was tested.
God promises Abram three things; Land, Children, and Blessing.
Abram does what Adonai asks him,
but again and again on his journey it looks to him
like God isn't going to hold up God's end of the bargain.
Abram has seen the land, yes,
but it still belongs to someone else.
And Abram and Sarah are old even ancient before they have children.
Even though the word of the Lord comes to Abram saying,
"Do not be afraid, Abram, for I am your shield;
your reward will be very great,"
to the eager Abram the words ring hollow,

and the promise seems far away.

And so he cries out to the Lord, “O Lord God what will you give me?”



The journey of faith,

the effort to grow our faith, to make it stronger
ends here,

in a way where it began,

with the realization that all we have comes from God.

And so we discover that if we want more faith,

it will come like everything else in our lives,
from God.

It is no small thing that God brings Abram outside to answer his question.



After a day of backpacking,

when the tents are up,

the dinner is done,

the dishes are washed,

and the water for the next day has been filtered;

in short when all the work is done,

there is only one show in town.

It's time for the sky show.

If you're in the right place you can see the sun set on the lake

and as day passes slowly into night the stars come out.

One cannot gaze up at the stars on a clear night in the wilderness

and not be struck dumb by the enormity of scope.

When one grows up in the city or suburbs

you can count the number of stars you can see

And not use all your fingers and toes.

But to look at the stars where the nearest light bulb is twenty miles away

is to be truly overwhelmed.

To see the stars is to believe again in the power of God's blessing
and the abundance of God's love.

What unimaginable generosity to give us the stars.

Jesus tells us,

“Do not be afraid, little flock,

for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”

The stars remind us that if the Father is giving us the kingdom,
what more do we really need.

The stars are a treasure in the sky

that constantly remind us of that unfailing treasure in heaven

that no thief can come near nor moth destroy.

So whenever it is a dark dreary November in your soul

and you find your faith flagging,

remember the stars.

Take a little time and look up.

It will be time well spent.

Amen!