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Sermon Transcript: Homesick

Have you ever had to drive through a terrible storm? Like a real heavy downpour, maybe extreme foggy conditions, or through a snowstorm? It could be kind of scary. It's hard to stay on the road. I remember one time I was up in Chicago for a meeting with some other church leaders, and then it was Saturday and I wanted to get back home. I mean, I'd love to say that I was rushing home because I was supposed to preach the next day and I didn't want to have to call up Pastor Alex and say, "You got to do it for me. Quick, make something up." But no, I didn't do it for you, I'm sorry. I did it because I missed my wife and I missed my kids and I just wanted to be home.

And I didn't care that there was a snowstorm happening and the snow was falling and falling. And as it's coming down, you can barely see in front of you. You end up like—you look maybe 20, 30 feet in front of you, but then you're just looking at the lines, you know? You've got a white line over here and occasionally a yellow line pops up over here, and you're just trying to stay on the road. And then every once in a while there's a car coming the other direction. And why is it that half of them have their brights on? How is that working for them? When I turn on my brights, it just makes all the snow light up and I can't see anything! But they're coming down with the bright lights at you and it blinds you for a second; you got to look back down at the line so you don't run into something.

Eventually, the road conditions get so bad that I just managed to put myself into a little caravan with a bunch of other cars. And I just watched those taillights and I just followed them. And, you know, I don't know if they're good drivers or not, but they're on the road still—at least it looks like they are. And so I just would follow those little lights. Eventually the snow got so heavy that I couldn't even see the lines on the road anymore. I was just following taillights and tire tracks down the highway, trusting that I was going to make it home.

The Storm of the Hebrews and the Roll Call

Our audience of this letter to the Hebrews is in a storm of their own. Terrible things have happened to them. If you go back one chapter to Hebrews 10, they have suffered all sorts of indignities, and they have been made fun of for their faith, and they even have had property taken away from them. And some of them are starting to lose heart. Some of them are starting to no longer gather with their fellow believers anymore. And so the writer is trying to encourage them, and he decides to encourage them with a roll call: a roll call of those who've been faithful.

But first he tells them what faith is: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for. It is a conviction of things not seen." What is faith? This description can leave us with this idea that faith is—it's just a really strong feeling. It's when you can't really fully comprehend it, and so it's just a really strong

feeling. But the problem with that is that, well, how strong of a feeling does it have to be? How much does that feeling have to overwhelm and take over and guide you?

We look at the examples then that are given, and we start with Abraham. Abraham, who follows this guidance from God and doesn't even know where he's going. I don't know what kind of feeling that involved for him without even knowing where he's going. Still has hope in what God has planned. And it goes on to say that he didn't even fully get to realize it. He ends up living in a tent, a temporary living situation in the land that was supposedly his. And it goes on to the next generation; he doesn't even fully get to realize the promise. And yet he continues to have faith.

Faith as Homesickness

I think if we're looking for a definition of what faith is, I think the Bible tells us here another way to look at it in verse 14 when it said that they were a people in search of a homeland, an eternal homeland. Because really what faith is, is faith is not so much just a really strong feeling. It's homesickness. It's a belief that there is a place prepared that is better than the situation in front of us in that moment. Faith is homesickness. It's a desire for that home that is promised to us. And it goes beyond what we can see in our limited vision that we might have through the storms of our own lives.

We hold on to the promises we have from God like I was holding on to those lines on the side of the road coming down from Chicago in the midst of that storm. Because it's not that my full faith was really just in my ability to drive, and our faith is not built purely on our confidence in our own abilities. It's not so much that we can always see the road; it's just that we have faith in the One who made the road. I mean, I don't know the people who put the lines on the road that I was driving on, but I have faith that they didn't draw the lines to go off a cliff. I have faith that if I stay between those lines, I'm going to stay on the road that was built for the purpose of getting me in this direction that eventually would get me home. And that desire to be home made me rely on the ones that had made the road. And as we go through our lives of faith, we're to have confidence in the One who made the road we're on, who gave us the signs, the guides along the way.

This roll call in Hebrews keeps going. Then we get on into Moses, and talking about Moses. And Moses had the bright lights of Egypt all around him of just how wonderful it could be for him. He could have had the easiest life living in luxury, but those lights were simply blinding to the path that God had for him. And Moses averted his eyes from that and instead followed the path that God had for him. Even though that meant the uncertainty of his own safety, it's like those lights coming at you as you're driving down the highway in the middle of a storm: if you look right at them, if you get caught up in them, you're going to get lost. It's the ability to pull your eyes away from that and to stay focused on the road, on the path that gets you to the true home that you're intended to be at.

The Low Bar of Imperfect Saints

When we go on into the story, we start to get a roll call of some more characters. And honestly, I mean, like Gideon and Samson and Jephthah—these are some oddball characters. I don't know if you remember, but a couple months ago, we talked about Gideon. Gideon, who kept demanding signs from God, and then once things went well, then he built up an ephod for people to worship and just to get himself secured in leadership. Gideon isn't so great! Jephthah, if you go and read about his story, you're going to find out that he sacrificed his own daughter out of some promise that he made that we skipped over.

So it's—all of Hebrews 11, it just keeps listing all these other characters. You get Noah. Oh, Noah, he was great, right? Oh, he followed God's direction, building the ark. Noah's story ends with him drunk, naked, and passed out in front of his kids. We don't usually act that out during the children's drama, you know! All of these characters that are listed as great people of faith, if you read their full story, I mean, honestly, they're a bunch of nincompoops. And when you read these stories, you think to yourself, "Okay, if that's the great example of faith, I might be able to do that."

I like the low bar that the Bible sets for me. And it even says God regarded all these people of faith, and God was not ashamed to be their God. God was not ashamed. So if God's not ashamed to be their God, well then maybe God wouldn't be ashamed to be my God.

I mean, honestly, when I was driving down that road through the snowstorm, I had no idea of the driving skills of the people with those taillights in front of me. And I'm sure they weren't perfect drivers; I bet some of them had accidents on their record. But sometimes we have to rely on the imperfect witness of others to guide us on this path. At one point the snow was so heavy, it was completely covering the road. All I had left was taillights and tire tracks to get me home.

And sometimes in our own lives, things get so heavy that we can't see the signs anymore. We can't detect the One who made the road for us. Maybe that's happened to you after leaving a doctor's office with a diagnosis that you weren't ready to hear. Maybe that's happened to you being up in the middle of the night and there's someone that you love and you don't know where they are and you're worried. Maybe that's happened to you where for years you've had this feeling of God in your life or some notion of faith, but lately because of things that have happened to you, just right now you just don't feel it. And it's in those moments that we need some other people in our lives.

Deer on Lebanon Avenue: When the Unexpected Strikes

Sometimes things happen, right? Sometimes we're carried into other circumstances. Last week, two people who are very dear to me were involved in a car accident. They were driving on Lebanon Avenue and just after they got through the intersection at Green Mount Road, a deer came out from the side of the road and smashed into the front of their car, and then hit another car and went off on the side of the road, and their car was totaled. Now, fortunately, they're both okay. No injuries, thanks be to God.

But, you know, here's the funny thing: this deer just flew out of nowhere. You could never anticipate that. You can't avoid that. These things happen. Despite that, I still plan on driving.

Despite that, I still will find myself following the signs and the lines in the road when I drive, even when I'm in a scary storm. And when we're in our lives of faith and something comes out of nowhere, something that we don't have control over, some circumstance just pops out—likewise, that should not keep us from continuing on this path.

There are some that when the deer comes out and hits the vehicle of our life, we go, "Well, that's it. I'm not driving anymore. I'm not following God anymore. If life's going to have these unexpected moments, then I'm out." We understand as people of faith that sometimes things just happen. And that deer isn't going to keep me from feeling good about driving. And those circumstances aren't going to keep me from wanting to get to that eternal home that God has prepared for me to have. And I will not reach that in this lifetime. It says all these witnesses of faith that were listed, none of them reached the full reward, but yet they continued to the homeland that they'd never been to.

Following Guides and Leaving Tire Tracks

So what do we do? I think we take a few lessons from driving.

The first of which is that we try to find some of those lines, some of those signs that we can follow in our own path so that we can express that faith we have in the One who made the road that we're on. I think it's just—it's perfect, the verse, Patty, that you have on that desk: that you know the plans that God has for you in that passage from Jeremiah. Yes. And maybe those guidelines for you—it's something like that. It's a Bible verse that sits on your desk that reminds you of those promises. Maybe it's a prayer that you make sure that you say every day, a practice in your life. It's coming here and worshiping. I know you all didn't wake up this morning and were like, "I get to go to church, woohoo!" Some of you battled something to get here. Some of you battled the snooze on an alarm clock. Some of you battled through some aches and pains. Some of you battled through just the heaviness of life right now. But you're not going to forsake that opportunity to have that bit of guidance, those lines, those reminders in your life that there is One who has prepared this path for you. And yes, it involves coming and being part of a faith community. And yes, maybe it involves a particular Bible verse or a prayer or something that you can look at and experience on a regular basis that keeps you on the path. Find your guides. Find your lines. Find your signs.

And there's going to be things that happen in this life that are going to seem very attractive: bright, shiny lights that will blind you to the path that you're on. But don't go towards those things. All sorts of things that are going to make it seem like this is the worthy use of your time, this is the place to put your priorities. But honestly, what is it that you'll pursue that will be quite as life-giving as finding your way to the eternal home of the One who has loved you this much? You got to know that every single one of those blinding lights that are coming at you, they're going in the wrong direction. If you want to go home, you keep your head down, you look for those lines, you look for those guides, and you make your way through the storms of life.

And occasionally things get so heavy that you need something else to guide you. And that's when you look for those taillights. Look for those people around you in this faith community, in your life,

who are maybe just a little farther down that road of faith and faithfulness than you. Someone who's got something to share with you, to show you that you can follow, that you can look at their life and know that they're on the path. And though they're not perfect, there's something that I can follow there that'll help me get home.

And the really neat thing is that not only do you have that from someone else, but if you're so very fortunate, you might be a guide to someone who's a little behind where you are. Because make no mistake: confirmation students who are in this congregation are looking around at the rest of you to see what you're doing. Even the youngest here notice what you're doing. They'll notice the words you say, the kindness or lack thereof that you exhibit, the patience that you have or the quick-to-anger or irritability. And the people in your family see it, and your friends. And in those moments, you have an opportunity to show them, because they're going to look for your tire tracks—and you could lead them astray. So be careful who you follow, but also be careful because someone's following you.

And when we rely on one another, we'll get there. Maybe not even in this lifetime, but we will get there because we have faith in the One who made the road. We have faith in the One who promised a path for us. This is the faith that we have to follow. It's not a certainty. It's not a big strong feeling. It's homesickness for the home that's been prepared for us.

So let us not grow weary, and let us not seek to have the whole thing rest on us, because it's not our faithfulness, but the faithfulness of God—the faithfulness of God that'll get us home. May God be glorified as you drive through this life and through the storms that may come and the deer that come railing out of the forest.

Hallelujah. Amen.