One of my favorite songs that we used to sing when I was serving African American churches was this one, maybe you have heard it. “We’ve come this far by faith, leaning on the Lord, trusting in His Holy Word, He’s never failed me, he’s never failed me yet.”

In our scripture lesson for today the writer of Hebrews points to the great faith of Abraham, a faith that made him the patriarch, the father, of a great people, the Israelites. Hebrews is a book, as its title suggests, that was written for Jewish Christians, folks who were followers of the Law of Moses, but were convinced by the early evangelists that Christ was indeed the Messiah of God, the savior of the world. These Jewish Christians would of course be familiar with the story of Abraham, and God’s promise to him as is the writer of Hebrews.

What was that promise? That Abraham and Sarah, his wife, would be the parents of a new nation, one that was so numerous it would be like counting the stars in the sky or the grains of sand on a beach. In other words, a lot of folks. Using the faith of Abraham as our guide, I want to talk just a bit about the story of Abraham and Sarah and the ways in which it informs our lives today.

The promise of God to Abraham gets off to a rather rocky start. Abraham is living a pretty good life in what is called the cradle of civilization by many scholars, the Tigres and Euphrates river valley in what is modern day Iraq. Abraham is told by God that he needs to move, him and his wives and his servants, pick up lock, stock and barrel and head to a new place that God will show him, a new land, a new place to call home. The journey takes them through many a thorny path, south through Egypt and then north and east to Palestine. Life is not easy,
danger seems to lurk constantly and at times Abraham questions what it is that God is really asking of him. All the time, however, Abraham follows God faithfully, and listens to the urgings of the Spirit.

We, none of us, ever know exactly where our faith journey will take us. Following the leading of the Holy Spirit is never an easy thing. It is hard to discern, and it is hard to follow even if we do manage to get the calling right. It often requires giving things up that we cherish, and welcoming things we might fear. Sometimes our world gets turned upside down, and it is then that we need to remember the faith of Abraham, and the promise of God to lead us.

Visiting with a friend and colleague the other day she said something that I thought profound. We were talking about trust, and especially trusting in God. She said, “God has been with me all my life, never abandoned me, so why would I think God has abandoned me now.” She continued, “When I get down I think of the verse of Amazing Grace, through many dangers toils and snares I have already come”, and when I think of it I always start to cry because it is true of my life that God has been with me through it all. Through it all, through it all, I’ve learned to trust in Jesus, I’ve learned to trust in God.

There were many times Abraham had reason to doubt God’s goodness, God’s love, and God’s leading. Yet he remained faithful in his journey. A journey that ultimately led him to the land that God promised, a good land that enabled Abraham to prosper, his cattle and flocks increased, he had servants and even soldiers. Yet there was part of that promise that remained unfulfilled. The part about grains of sand and stars in the heavens, Abraham and his wife Sarah never had children.
Then, as is always the case, Abraham got old, so did his wife. Genesis says that Abraham was near 90 and Sarah was no longer able to conceive. It looked like that part of the promise was gone.

Then one hot summer day Abraham was resting under some oak trees on the family farm near Mamre when he saw three strangers approaching. He did not know these strangers, but treated them with extreme hospitality, inviting them to his tent, preparing the best food he had, urging them to stay and recover from their journey. Maybe it was because Abraham knew what it was like to be a sojourner in strange land, maybe it was because Abraham knew what it was like to be alone and afraid when approaching strangers, and to live by faith that he would survive the encounter, at any rate he goes out of his way to welcome the strangers.

We welcome today Reverend Paul Caseman. Paul will be serving as our part-time associate pastor and it is really good to have him as part of our congregation, again. Some of you know Paul began his journey into ordained ministry here at Catalina. Many of you knew him then, and Paul has returned to us. Those of you who have not had a chance to know him will get that opportunity in the coming months.

I want to say a word about Paul, in a personal note. When we came to Catalina and Tucson over 7 years ago, Paul was one of the first clergy I met. That meeting itself was kind of funny, but I will let Paul tell you that story sometime because he tells it a lot better than I. For some reason Paul and I hit it off right away, and I had only just arrived when he invited me to be a part of a clergy covenant group in which he was co-founder and member. They had been meeting for a couple of years, and Paul asked me to be part of the group. I said yes, not knowing really what it would mean to me over the last few years.
Paul welcomed me with hospitality. This group became very important to my ministry and me personally, they were colleagues, new friends, and they helped me meet others and share the joys and frustrations of a new ministry in a new city. They did everything from simply giving me directions to the hospitals to listening to my grief as I told the story of my son, Sam’s, death. But I could not have made such a smooth transition without Paul. So I thank him now, publicly, for helping me in my journey from Nebraska to Arizona and making it easier to live by faith. ‘He’s never failed me, he’s never failed me yet.’

Abraham’s hospitality is rewarded. The men, it appears, are messengers, angels of God who reaffirm the fact that Abraham and Sarah will have a son, and that they will be the parents of generations to come. Generations that will inherit the promise, and God will be with them. This is too good to believe, however, even for the faithful Abraham, they are both old, too old, Abraham has faith, but not even he can quite believe this. Sarah thinks it’s so funny that when she hears it she laughs out loud. How can it be, that at their age they should have in the euphemism of Genesis, “pleasure”.

And yet nine months later, there he is. A son, their son, the heir of the promise made by God years before. They name him Isaac, which in Hebrew means, laughter. It is not all one big joke on Abraham and Sarah after all. And Isaac, laughing boy has twin sons, and one of those sons, Jacob, has a dozen sons, and so it begins, stars too many to count.

Here is the point this morning, however. The book of Hebrews tells us that we now inherit the same promise. We are Abraham’s offspring, not by birth, or by blood, but by faith. We are the new people of God, and as such are heirs of the promise made to Abraham, that God will be with us, and we shall be God’s people.
What does that mean exactly? To me it means that by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ we become God’s children, God’s holy people. We do not journey through life alone, we have God, we have one another. It also means to me that we become bearers of this Good News to others. We welcome them with hospitality, we feed them, and house them and provide rest for weary souls. We walk with them on their journeys and care and support them because we ourselves know what it means to need God and others if we are to survive this journey we call life.

We lean upon the Lord, and in doing so we get the strength to let others lean upon us. And when the journey of life is over, when we breathe our last, then we continue to be in God’s presence even in death. That is a promise. We’ve come this far by faith and faith will lead us home.