

# Jeanne Marcus: Between Memory and Vision

Seekers Church

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## Between Memory and Vision

[Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-16](#)

Today, the lectionary contains an epistle passage that has especially drawn me for many years-the 11th Chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews. I have turned to this passage many times, drawn by its evocative phrases and images; and drawn by its mix of memory and vision. Hebrews 11 works for me like coordinates on my spiritual map, reminding me of where I am located in God's space and time and reminding me of the kind of journey I am intending to follow. Moreover, this reminder of where I am in the larger scheme of things, and where I am going has often restored me to a sense of peace, of being grounded again in the most important things.

I am drawn to the passage, then, first because it is about memory: and particularly, because it is about whom my people are. It is the telling of the story, like listening to a community elder, the storyteller, reciting the ancient tale of my lineage-not my genetic lineage, but my spiritual one. It is not just that these are people to admire, delight in, or whose lives we ponder in trying to determine God's ways in relating to humanity. They are all of that.

They are also a people whose story has a power to animate and enliven me. I-we-descend spiritually from a line of people who have repeatedly heard God's promises, and responded boldly.

They are a people who have steered their lives in accordance with their discernment of God's leadings, even though what they believe they have heard has often been unexpected and daunting. They have a history of making major life changes, like leaving home and family, on the basis of nothing tangible, nothing they can point to; decisions that those around them must have found reckless and imprudent.

The first was Abraham: he and Sarah are the focus of today's passage. He was 75 years old when he first heard God's vision of a new plan for his life. He and Sarah were given two promises: a new land, which will be their inheritance, and descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky.

When Abraham and Sarah set out, there is no tangible sign that they are making the right decision-indeed that they are making a sane decision. Abraham and Sarah have no children. Moreover, they have absolutely no clue about where they are going. Yet they go, as if they know, really know, that their actions will bear fruit.

Abraham does come in good time to a land that he discerns is that homeland God has meant for him. Nevertheless, I want to hold up here the fact that it took 25 more years before Sarah bore Abraham a son. This is to say, there were many years of Abraham struggling and laboring, getting closer to his death, before there was any real evidence that the core promise-the promise that made having the land even meaningful, was actually becoming physical truth.

In next week's lectionary, the saga continues: more of our spiritual ancestors making decisions to follow a God-given vision, despite the fact that all tangible evidence points to their certain failure. There are stories of Moses and the Israelites standing up to Egypt; passing through the Red Sea as if it were dry land. There is the story of Joshua bringing down the walls of Jericho. The storyteller then continues: "What more can I say? For time would fail me to tell of

Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets-who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, put foreign armies to flight.”

This, then, is our spiritual lineage, these awesome people, boldly following their leadings, and doing amazing things. If we recognize ourselves as descended from them in faith, then their power and boldness somehow are available for us as well, for our faith draws from the same well as theirs. The God who gave them promises and power is the same God that we know and seek to serve.

This passage is about memory: but it is also about vision. It offers us the images, visions and hopes that so strongly moved these people through the ages. It is given us with an assurance that we who come later will also feel a heart's allegiance to that same vision. What they sought is this: they “looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”

“A city that has foundations”: the implication is that that city will have what none of the cities they actually experienced had. Having a foundation is to be built on solid ground, to be constructed on strong supports that will remain unshakable, and that will bear the weight. A city with foundations will not be washed away in the next flood or blown down in the next hurricane. This city will stand the test, will last, is real. We can stake our life on it.

The comparison is to all known earthly cities-built as they have all been on somewhat shaky ground. Cities have historically been either walled fortresses, which are embodiments of, or defensive responses to human violence. Alternatively, they have been settlements established at geographical points favorable to buying and selling, the trading of goods and the amassing of wealth. Even spaces that

may have begun as sacred sites mixed human motives that are more dubious. They become sites of power, control and moneymaking. This city with foundations will be different. It will be a city "... whose architect and builder is God."

I have a friend who is an architect, who has achieved good critical acclaim for her designs for new and restored houses. She is also a mother of two young daughters, and has wild wavy hair and a big laugh. If I think about her considering a project, I can see the design coming into birth in her eye- she is seeing the possibilities, and also seeing the constraints-but also looking for the ways to turn the constraints into new possibilities.

She is feeling for the rhythms, for the harmonies, for the beauty; but she is also planning toward the needs of those who are going to be using the space. She loves the materials, woods and tiles, loves colors and textures: she loves the little details as well as the big design. In addition, she has the knowledge needed to make it work. That is one of the things that come to me when I think about "the city whose architect and builder is God". I think about a city that is built in imagination, in beauty, knowledge, understanding and compassion.

Jesus used another term, the Kingdom of God, which we now translate sometimes as the realm of God. In my own mind, I have been translating it as the Republic of God, which gets us thinking in the terms we most commonly use now. Whatever term, it is a vision for a different way of living together. In that place, each of us is recognized as a child of God-no one is expendable; we do not fail to find the resources for each to become what God intended. Our differences do not keep us apart: we open our homes and lives to each other. We help each other get free from things that hold us in bondage, whether that bondage is political, economic, cultural or emotional. We know compassion and forgiveness.

It is the story of our ancestors, and the vision of God's city: this passage locates us between past and future, between memory and imagination. We bring to mind the story of our lineage because we have chosen the same journey our ancestors were on: we are on the road to the same vision. We remember them in order to be nurtured, to build our strength as we continue to pursue their visions. Our remembering is for the sake of the future, nourishment for the journey.

Our lives are shaped by our stories in two directions. Most of us easily understand that our present is shaped by our past: psychotherapy is based upon the understanding that we can know who we are now by understanding our past. Only people who understand the importance of Call can as readily see that our future stories are equally active in determining who it is we are right now. By moving us towards a vision that draws us forward in delight, hope in our future story is already a co-author at work shaping our present.

This is a passage about hope. I think of hope as a kind of double vision. It is the ability to see two things clearly at the same time. First, we see the actual, visible reality around us. This is hard enough, judging from my own experience. But hope can not only see the actual clearly, but at the same time can perceive the spirit of God-in all its creative, transformative compassionate power—moving within and through all that. A person of hope can see that movement of spirit happening within themselves, within those around them, and within the cosmos itself.

There are another couple of sentences I want to call attention to: "They [the ancestors] confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return."

This reminds us of a harder aspect of living in hope. Double

vision can leave us awkwardly suspended in spiritual space. We are neither comfortably ensconced in the land of our birth, nor arrived at the city of our longings. We glimpse only the briefest views of the city of God and only from a distance. However, these glimpses change everything: we may no longer fit easily into the old structures of our lives. Things shifts; what used to feel important no longer does. Our allegiance changes-our hope calls us to be part of building that other homeland.

There is both sadness and a joy to being dislocated in this way. Exiles have a hunger for the homeland: they come together for a while, to create some piece of the homeland even in the exile place-sharing food, speaking the language of the truer home, sharing the old stories, and learning from each other ways of living with integrity on the line between two cultures.

Finally, I return to the first line of the chapter: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." This line does not reflect wishful thinking, not waiting for the preferred future to work itself out; not even optimism. It reflects Assurance! Conviction! No doubts at all.

A quote from Walter Wink captures this:

*"History belongs to the intercessors, who believe the future into being. The future belongs to whoever can envision a new and desirable possibility, which faith then fixes upon as inevitable. Hope envisages its future and then acts as if that future is now irresistible, thus helping to create the reality for which it longs."*

Hebrews 11 shows us who and where we are: our lives firmly planted between memory and vision, drawing strength both from remembering who our people are and from capturing glimpses of the city with foundations, the Republic of God. Moreover, it gently urges us toward what our real call is: creating the new

reality by acting as if that vision is irresistible.