

About 15 years ago, two American entrepreneurs decided to see if they could make some money by introducing bungee-jumping to Mexico. They went down to Puerto Villarta and built a platform, where people who like "extreme sports" could dive off and spring up and down as they do in the states. When it came time for the trial run, the two entrepreneurs climbed up the platform and looked down on the gathering crowd. They knew what they had to "do," but decided to flip a coin to see who got to "do it." The entrepreneur who "won" (or "lost," depending on how you look at it) put on the harness and dove off. When he came up the first time, his partner noticed that his nose was bloody. When he came up the second time, it was obvious that one eye was turning black. When he came up a third time, part of his ear was missing. He yelled out, "Are you okay?" On his way down a fourth time, his partner yelled back, "What is a piñata?"

"Life is difficult." That is the first line of a hugely popular book. Certain books are known for their first lines, such as: "It was the best of times and the worst of times," from Charles Dickens Tale of Two Cities. "Happy families are all alike, every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way," from Leo Tolstoy's Anna Karenina. "Life is difficult" is the opening sentence of M. Scott Peck's The Road Less Travelled. It was a very important book when it appeared in the 1980's presenting a path for both spiritual and psychological growth. Peck wrote about ways to confront and solve problems in this life, knowing that everyone must suffer through the pain and heartache that life inevitably brings. His premise is that self-understanding comes from embracing suffering and boldly moving through problems, not avoiding or denying them.

Life is difficult. Who would not agree with that statement? And life only gets more difficult as the years unfold. How do we deal with all of the losses and the setbacks that life inevitably sends our way? What gives us the ability to embrace hope in the midst of life's greatest difficulties? How can we let God do the best of things during the worst of times in our lives? The writer of Hebrews tells us how to do just that. Hebrews suggests that we need to stay focused upon that which we cannot see, and trust in that which we do not know. Belief in God, faith in something better beyond this life, is not just wishful thinking or superstition. It is a heartfelt knowledge based upon experience, an unconditional trust in a power greater than ourselves. And it is a gift.

Faith brings profound meaning out of life's difficulties. Faith accepts the fact that we live in a world of unfulfilled promises and broken dreams. Although life is hard, God is good and there is a greater purpose for all things.

According to the author of Hebrews, faith is not a final destination but a lifelong journey. The examples are given of countless people who stepped out in faith, going off into uncertain futures. They never fully arrived, never achieved their goals. They trusted and lived with integrity, generosity and honor. All of which brings us to Abraham — the Bible’s first extreme adventurer. The writer of Hebrews tells us that Abraham was old enough to be “as good as dead” when he set out on that journey of faith, accepting God’s itinerary for a treacherous trek westward “not knowing where he was going.” It was a ticket to uncertainty and discomfort — sleeping in tents, living as a foreigner, dealing with all the various peoples in Canaan. All of this in his old age. Abraham and his entourage were to be strangers in a strange land, yet he threw caution to the desert wind, and made a home in the land God showed him. And, as if the journey itself wasn’t enough, God interrupts Abraham and Sarah’s dangerous sojourn with a promise — they were going to have a baby and descendants “as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore..”

The writer makes it clear that Abraham could just as easily have turned around and gone home — back to the country and comforts he was accustomed to. But Abraham wasn’t thinking of the land that they had left behind. Instead, he was focused on making a new home within the promises of God — a home not just grounded on earth but “a better country ... a heavenly one.” Abraham saw his home as wherever God was, and he endeavored faithfully to live into that divine presence. No matter where God was calling him on that nomadic pathway, Abraham was confident that he was exactly where he was supposed to be. Abraham beautifully modeled the truth that human life on earth will always be difficult, but our home is where God is. That really does give new meaning to the term “homeland security.”

As Abraham’s story suggests, so often faith is framed in terms of a journey to an uncertain and even dangerous place. It has always been so. The dangers our spiritual ancestors endured were profound. They faced persecution and even death for their beliefs. We do not face such overt risks and dangers, but the journey of faith has never been easy. We still must live as strangers in a strange land, as nomads and wanderers upon the earth. We still must fight injustice, poverty, oppression and stand against many of the values of our culture. The journey of faith can take you to places you might not choose to go, might lead you to do things you would never otherwise do. Jesus is the best example of one who followed the path of faithfulness, even though it was so difficult for him, even though it led to a cross.

Which does bring me to sharing with you a very interesting new trend in travel. If you haven't been on vacation yet this summer, I have some suggestions for you. There is an ever growing number of adventurous vacationers who are opting to venture into some of the world's most dangerous hot spots. Places that dominate the headlines have suddenly become desirable destinations, and Robert Pelton, in his book "The World's Most Dangerous Places," is encouraging people to visit them. Think of it: biking in Baghdad, eating kebabs in Kabul, picnicking in Pakistan or even tanning in East Timor. Travel writers are picking up on this trend. Bradt Travel Guides has recently published guides to places like North Korea and Iraq. The Afghanistan guide calls Kabul the "...hottest city east of Suez," but be careful because "...land mines are still a roadside hazard." And of course the Taliban are a quite a wild card, as those 21 South Korean women who were kidnaped now realize.

The reasons people pick up travel guides for these extreme tours vary. Some are armchair tourists who are just curious about the world and have no intention of going, some are adventurous and want to see the reality behind the news stories, some have to travel to these places as part of their work and, some are just adrenaline junkies looking for the excitement a sojourn into a combat zone might provide. For the "been there, done that" traveler, the most dangerous places in the world represent a promising new frontier.

And yet, truly living a spiritually enlightened life in 21st century America is an adventure in itself. It is a journey that requires courage, discipline and integrity. It is a journey inward toward self discovery and growth. Hebrews 11 is called the "faith chapter" because it recognizes that our spiritual ancestors didn't play it safe. They stepped up to a challenge — they trusted God in the midst of pain, loss, torture, mocking, scorn, chains and imprisonment. For them the journey of faith was no vacation, but the rewards were far greater than frequent flier miles. The payoff was a new understanding of themselves, a new relationship with God, and a fresh perspective on the world and their part in the great plans and promises of God.

Our spiritual heritage is full of wanderlust. At some point, everyone in the Bible is on a journey, motivated by God's promise of something new. Like Abraham, our spiritual ancestors saw themselves as "strangers and foreigners on the earth," people whose home was somewhere beyond the map, but still with God. Faith, the "assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" called

them, and calls us, to move out of the comfort zone, to see danger not in moving, but in staying put. God will meet us wherever we are, but God will not allow us to stay where we are.

There is no escaping the fact that human life on earth has always been difficult. We will face dangers and losses, setbacks and challenges, tragedies we do not deserve. But as people called by God, we continue to trust in that which we cannot see, and believe in what we do not fully understand. We believe there is so much more to the universe and to ourselves than meets the eye. The journey of faith is a recognition that there's no immediate payoff. Instead it's a long-distance trip with an eternal perspective geared toward the very long haul. Faith is an open-ended ticket, an invitation, an adventure that starts, but never ends — even when you do.

One thing about this trip that's for sure — you will care less and less about your own happiness, money, success, popularity, and achievements. You will care more and more about God's creation and other people, especially the forsaken and forgotten. You learn that by losing your life, you really do save it in the end. And although life is very, very difficult, God is always good.

Let us pray: Help us, dear God, to be faithful in the midst of life's difficulties. Help us to trust in that which we cannot see, and believe in that which we do not fully understand. Help us to bring light, hope, and blessing into this sad and weary world. Use us to be the change we hope to see all around us. Amen.