

A wandering faith: Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

by [Lawrence Wood](#) in the [July 27, 2004](#) issue

In 1492, the Jews were expelled from Spain. For centuries they had been tolerated there, and their labor had helped to build a great country. But King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, anxious to establish their hold over a newly united Spain by means of the Catholic Church and the Inquisition, gave the Jews a stark choice: they must be baptized or flee.

Even though they were not allowed to take gold or silver with them and had to forfeit their homes, 165,000 of them reluctantly chose to go. All they took with them, besides a few simple possessions, was their faith. These Sephardic Jews settled in North Africa, Greece and Turkey. Today their descendants number 2 million. They still keep enormous, ancient house keys that last touched their locks some 500 years ago—symbols of dispossession and of hope that someday they might go home.

The legend of the Wandering Jew, who supposedly refused to help Christ along the Via Dolorosa and so was condemned to a dolorous exile, is a cruel echo of Jewish history. It recalls the nomadic Abraham, “a wandering Aramean,” and the Hebrews who wandered in the desert for forty years, as well as those exiled from Israel by the Babylonians and the Romans. The irony of the legend is that somehow this terrible history of dispossession didn’t destroy the Jews’ faith—it *established* it. All those settled, comfortable ancient peoples have crumbled into the sands, while the Jews have survived with their faith intact. At times they have had nothing *but* faith. Maybe that’s the key.

Jesus was a wandering Jew—an itinerant preacher who said, “Foxes have holes, birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” His followers too were wandering Jews—carrying not even cloaks, bags or sandals, only a powerful faith. Several years after his death and resurrection, they were still wandering, and wondering: Shouldn’t we have arrived at the kingdom of God by now? The Letter to the Hebrews encouraged those Christian pilgrims to keep on living by faith, “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

It was called not “the letter to the Jewish Christians” but “the Letter to the Hebrews,” using the older term. It recalled how Abel, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses all lived and died seeing only part of the promise realized; yet they were blessed along the journey. This wonderful letter suggested that Christians who become like those Hebrews become better Christians.

The truth is, we are all wandering Jews: Jews through Christ, who brought us into God’s family; and wanderers, pilgrims who hope to go home.

In 1492, the same year that Spain expelled the Jews, it defeated the Muslims, or Moors, and soon the Inquisition forced them either to be baptized or leave. To this day, some of their descendants treasure symbols of those lost homes.

Not long ago, at a news conference in North Africa, a woman from the PLO was presented to reporters as “a genuine refugee. Her father keeps in his possession, to this very day, the key to the house that his ancestors left 500 years ago when the Muslims were driven out of Spain.” You heard right. Amazingly, some Muslims and Jews remember their dispossession in just the same way—by keeping the keys to their former homes.

We Americans may be amazed to learn that Jews and Muslims lived peaceably together in Spain for almost a thousand years, and later in North Africa, often in the very same neighborhoods. This lasted well into the 20th century. The only people they did not want to live near were Christians.

I think this story has a lot to tell us about why we Christians have not been able to bring peace in the Middle East. Memories of us run deep, and perhaps we are not the trusted outsiders we think ourselves to be.

But a larger problem may be that Christianity seems to be about possession. Our Western privilege is at odds with a faith that supposedly began in radical simplicity.

Faith blooms in dispossession. When you don’t have anything else to hold onto, when you can no longer clutch lesser things, you hold onto your God, and your God holds onto you. As the Letter to the Hebrews recalled of Abraham and Moses,

They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in 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 an opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them (Heb. 11:13-16).

For similarly dispossessed people, the apostle Paul wrote, “For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, but eternal in the heavens” (2 Cor. 5:1).

In this eventful year, it is good for us to remember that someday our wanderings will end, our keys will touch the lock, and all God’s people will be home. It would be ironic and just, however, if the door did not open at once to our fists, if we Christians were made to wander a little longer. In fact it might do us good to find our pockets empty except for faith. After some wandering and wondering, we might discover that faith itself is the key.