

## **Introduction** [title slide: “Nomadic Faith | Jake Tillett”]

Such a joy to be with you this morning. Through your long years of partnership with the work in Mali and the many visits to West Africa, I’ve gotten to know many of you personally. And I have come to deeply appreciate CCC’s heart for missions. So it is a privilege for me to be here this morning.

Do you know the difference between a sad story and joyfully redemptive one? It’s often all about where you end the telling.

I think a lot about stories. It’s only a slight exaggeration to say that I make a living telling stories. When I’m in West Africa, I’m constantly telling the stories from the Bible in order to help people understand how beautiful the story of Jesus really is. When I’m back here in America, I tell stories to give you a glimpse of what God is doing in our work. Stories are quite powerful. They have the ability to inspire us, to convert us, and to change our thinking.

This means that the way we tell stories is inherently powerful. The way we frame the story and the way we start and end it determine its message and what life situations it addresses.

Take for example my own story. I can tell you about the painful end of 13 years in Mali and the difficulty restarting in Senegal, and how I’m just a mediocre language learner without a whole lot of exciting stories to tell you today. Or I can frame the story to tell you how God used 13 years in Mali to prepare me for this exciting, even if challenging, chapter of working among the Fulani in Senegal. I can tell you that the last year and a half have been a lonely time as the only Alliance worker in this dusty desert town. Or I can tell you how I’ve bravely created a beachhead, and that I’m excited to be welcoming other workers—a former teammate from Mali, as well as two young families.

The framing and the emphasis of each of those ways of telling my story will leave you with different emotions, and perhaps a different reaction to our next 30 minutes ahead. Dread to listen to this boring guy preach, or excitement to listen to me tell stories of God at work in West Africa.

Today, I want to share with you some stories of the start of our work among the Fulani. [Pictures 1 and 2] That people group may be familiar to some of you. They are the largest nomadic people in the world, dispersed across multiple West African countries, and in many ways they have been responsible for the spread of Islam across these countries. That is part of their story they tell proudly. The Fulani have featured in many prayer initiatives for unreached people groups, since there are incredibly few believers among them. But we are hoping to plant a network of faith communities that will grow and demonstrate clearly what it looks like for a Fulani to follow Christ.

And at the same time I want to encourage you in your own walk with the Lord and in your efforts to Reach One More. To do so, I want to look at the ways nomads frame their story. We’ll be looking at the book of Hebrews, which gives us lots of tools for reframing our own stories. And it holds nomads up as examples of faith.

## **Ousmane Story**

Let me start by telling you a story about a young Fulani boy named Ousmane.

I met Ousmane in a crowded open-air market. I was shopping because I had 30 people coming over for dinner that night. I felt a tug on my pant leg, and I just figured someone had stepped on me. But when I

felt it again, I turned around and saw this boy seated at my feet. He had a couple small coins in his hand that he tossed up and caught in an open palm, as a way of communicating that he was begging for money. [Picture 3] I turned him down and watched him crawl off. His knees were pulled up to his chest, and with flip-flops on his hands, he would use his arms to lift himself off the ground by an inch and propel himself forward.

I know how bad this sounds—and you don't know the half of it—but I have a firm policy of not intervening in medical cases in public. It draws too much attention and often gets messy. So I tried to walk away. But somewhere within the cold, stony interior of my heart, I felt the Holy Spirit tugging.

Long story short, I turned around, made a huge scene in the market, and we began a process of several months of running tests and talking to specialists here in America about Ousmane's case. After months of effort, we were left with nothing but inconclusive answers. Nothing we could do to reverse the course of the weakness that began to set in around the age of 10. No miracle cure for the deformation of his bones. And no solution to get him back to walking.

[Picture 4] Now Ousmane actually lives in a village a few hours from our town. He would only come into our town for a month or two at a time to beg for money in the market. As a 16-year-old without much other possibility to work or earn money, this seemed to him to be the way he could productively contribute to his family. After months of absence, Ousmane was once again in our town in December. Our hospital chaplain, Oumar, and I went to visit him at home. Oumar is in his early 50s and has lived enough adventure for 10 lifetimes. He was a freedom fighter in his youth, who eventually came to Christ because he figured he'd better be absolutely sure that he was forgiven for shedding blood. He has gone on to be arrested multiple times for his faith, kidnapped by jihadists, and rejected by his family.

[Picture 5] But despite this rough past, one of the things that delights Oumar more than anything is joyful banter with kids. Within a minute of meeting Ousmane, he was playfully teasing him. It turns out that Ousmane is no simple pushover, and he held his own in the banter. And at one moment, he bested Oumar in their verbal combat, which resulted in belly laughs all around. Oumar reached over and grabbed Ousmane's arm as they both rocked back and forth in laughter.

And I was transported to a holy moment as I looked on. In that one moment, this kid, living with a debilitating illness, who crawls around at the feet of strangers in the market to beg for pocket change, was able to be just a kid who made adults laugh. The joy on his face was radiant.

I'd love to leave the story there, as if somehow, though we couldn't fix his physical problems, we were able to transport Ousmane into a permanent state of joy that forgets his physical limitations. But the reality is harder. While I'd like to believe that our efforts have eased some of Ousmane's discomfort and our friendship has been an encouragement, during our most recent visit to his village, his parents told us they are detecting a weariness in him. And while we've presented the Gospel to Ousmane and his family, they have not yet decided to follow Christ. We are stuck in a hard chapter of this story.

Why leave you in the muddle of a story that is hard, sad, and not resolving the way we'd want? Well, first, it's the truth. And some of you have your own story that is currently stuck in places that are hard and sad and not resolving. But also because some of you, in your efforts to Reach One More, are currently in a hard chapter with that person you want so desperately to be made whole in Christ, but nothing seems to change, and you are asking yourself if anything will ever move in the right direction.

## **The Text: Hebrews 11:8–10**

And so this morning, I want to ask, what does Nomadic Faith say to us in the hard chapters of life? How does the story of nomads in the Bible, like Abraham, renew our strength and hope? Let's turn to our text this morning, which comes from Hebrews 11.

Some people find the book of Hebrews intimidating with all its references to the Old Testament temple and sacrificial system. But the goal of the author of Hebrews is simple enough. He is writing to an audience that is persecuted and is considering giving up and returning to the old Jewish system. So the author has two main goals, that are quite connected. The first is to hold Jesus high, establishing him as superior to every other religious system. He wants us to center our stories on Jesus. The second is to remind the readers of where they are at in their story—he reminds them of the past, acknowledges the difficulties of the present, and then stirs their hope for their future.

Interestingly, starting in Hebrews 10, we suddenly encounter the language of movement. Everyone the author talks about is in some sort of movement, and Biblical characters that lived nomadic lives are held up as examples. So let's read Hebrews 11:8-10, and we are going to focus on the nomadic imagery here.

**Hebrews 11:8–10: “By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith, he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”**

### **A unique definition of the good life**

Abraham essentially lives a nomadic life. Have you ever considered what makes nomads live like they do? I mean, do they just enjoy constantly changing scenery and not living in homes? Well, no, it isn't that. Rather, nomads have a unique story about themselves, and at the center of their story is an object of supreme value. That thing is what creates for them the good life.

**[Pictures 6 and 7]** For the Fulani, that is cows and livestock. The CCC vet team that visited in early January can attest to this. We treated almost 13,000 animals in just a few days in rural villages. It was a way to increase the standing of our few Christian Fulani partners in their own communities. And it opened up so many doors for follow-up conversations in these areas. As one of our Fulani believers has said, the way to a Fulani's heart is through their livestock.

Now, your location here in Omaha is going to mislead you. I have become over the years, a great appreciator of fine beef products from Omaha. If you come to visit me, please bring beef jerky! But, if you calculate the importance of cows for the Fulani in the same way you do here in Omaha, you'll get this wrong. We cannot calculate their value only in terms of beef, milk, or money.

**[Picture 8]** For the Fulani, cows are the source of the good life. Milk, meat, and money are a part of that. But it goes beyond that to a sense of well-being when the cows are around and the herd is growing. The Fulani take delight in knowing the genealogy of their cows, and they feel like the bloodlines of their cows connect them to their ancestors. Out in the wilderness, the old cows are the ones that remember where to find pasture and water. It's not wrong to say that in those situations the shepherds follow the herds instead of driving or leading them. Shepherds will sleep among the herd because the cows keep snakes

and scorpions away. Fulani are never happier than when pasture is plentiful, the cows are happy and producing lots of milk, and little ones are being born. This for them is the good life.

Abraham was certainly a shepherd, but we do not have any indication that his nomadic life was only because of his flocks. Rather, it seems that Abraham defined the Good Life as listening to God's voice. Wherever God was leading, that's where he wanted to be. He was never happier than when God had spoken, and he had obeyed.

**[Is Jesus at the center of my story?]** This draws me up short when I really get thinking about it. I mean, what does the story of my life--my life choices--really reveal about what I think the source of the Good Life is? I'd be quick to say, "Jesus" because I know that's the right answer, but does my life reveal something different? Economic comfort, family, friends, influence and power, sunny days at the lake—all these, and many more, compete to be our source of the Good Life.

For you and me, in the midst of hard chapters of life and ministry, we need to do exactly what the author of Hebrews proposes throughout the book—take another look at Jesus.

So in Hebrews 1 Jesus is the way God speaks to us. Concretely. Finally.

In Hebrews 2, Jesus takes on flesh and blood so he can break the power of death over our humanity.

In Hebrews 4, Jesus is our place of rest. And He's a high priest who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses.

In Hebrews 10, Jesus is the once for all sacrifice for our sins.

In Hebrews 12, Jesus is the one who keeps us going in our race.

This morning, re-see Him as the source of all that is truly good in our lives. Re-see him as the one that makes life worth living. Allow this glimpse of Christ renew our strength. Recenter Him in the stories of our lives.

This re-definition of the Good Life leads to a reordering of two other areas of our lives. I just want to touch on these briefly. I hope you will discuss these more thoroughly in your small groups this week.

### **A different system of resource management**

We read that Abraham, because he had obeyed God's command, was willing to live in tents. He embraced the nomadic way of life, and nomads have a different system for managing material resources. Abraham lived resource-lean.

When we look at nomads worldwide, we can see that nomadism is a system of managing resource scarcity. For the Fulani, for example, they are committed to their cows. The cows need grass, but grass in these desert zones is scarce. This means moving north and south continuously in response to the cycles of rain. The resource they need most for the good life is in short supply, so they keep moving.

**[Picture 9]** At the same time, because they are regularly on the move, they cannot accumulate a lot of excess weight. They limit themselves to what they can pull on little donkey wagons. In fact, accumulating too much weight can be dangerous to their survival.

Maybe this week, we can reflect on what resources we most need to live the Christ-centered good life. Time in the Word, time for prayer, encouragement of brothers and sisters in Christ, a mind and heart undistracted by the constant noise of our digital lives? [How can I lighten my wagon to more effectively be with Jesus?] And perhaps we can lighten what we are carrying in our wagons. Maybe we need to let go of the weight of some of our material possessions that are keeping us from following the call of Christ, or maybe we need to restructure our schedules so that we have the time we need with Him. Maybe our social media and news consumption habits need to change.

### **Different Relationships**

The second area of our lives that gets reordered when we redefine the Good Life as following Jesus is our relationships. We read that Abraham left behind his extended family and struck out independently to this new country. And yet, Abraham does not live as a lone ranger his whole life. He founds a family and is deeply concerned about their welfare.

[Picture 10] Nomads, like the Fulani, have to be willing to strike out alone, following the herds alone for days at a time. But they always look to come back to community—whether that is other nomads that take the same routes, or extended family that travels with them, and even the friends that live in towns and villages they frequently pass by.

It is interesting to notice that the author of Hebrews encourages his readers to fearlessly follow Christ, even if that means the rejection of the community. And yet, in the next breath, he encourages them to live in community and to “spur one another on to love and good deeds.”

For those that live in community-oriented contexts like West Africa, the challenge to follow Christ sometimes means making uncomfortable decisions to go against community. [In what ways can I live more fully in Jesus-centered community?] For those of us in the hyper-individualistic West, following Christ sometimes means a radical challenge to consciously live in community. What are ways in which you can more fully live in a community that is oriented around loving and serving Christ?

### **My Neighborhood Boys**

November and December were busy and exhausting months. And to make matters worse, the mosque right next door added a loudspeaker pointed right at my house. They started playing loud chanting every morning at 5 AM. And by early December it was making me edgy. I was beginning to understand how playing nonstop loud music could be considered a brainwashing technique.

Then, one day early in the month, I realized with horror that the empty house across the street from me had been rented by a local marabout—a local Muslim teacher. In West Africa, parents will actually give their young boys, some as young as five or six, to a marabout. This teacher is supposed to teach the boys to recite, read, and write the Qur’an. In exchange for the teaching, the boys are sent into the street to beg for their daily food and for money that is then given to the marabout.

Let me not mince words. This is a system of child exploitation that I find odious. When confronted by a group of boys with their hands outstretched, asking me for money, I’m confronted with a bouquet of unpleasant emotions. Anger at the exploitation, the annoyance of being mobbed every time I’m in the street, and incredible sadness when I look into the faces of these boys and think about the realities of their daily lives. I don’t know about you, but I can’t maturely handle negative emotions like that multiple

times of day, so to cope, I mainly just held the whole issue at arm's length—avoiding the boys whenever possible, politely and cooling dismissing them when they surround me, and mostly just trying not to think about the reality.

**[Picture 11]** Then they moved in across the street. Thirty young boys, mostly unsupervised, right outside my front door. Those first days were rough... the boys were climbing the walls, trying to look into my house. Throwing rocks at my dogs. Surrounding me every time I left the house.

I really wish I could tell you that I handled this with great maturity. But remember, I'm a storyteller, not a liar. Those first few days—okay, that first week—were rough. I was sure I was going to need to move. It felt like a personal attack on me. I was fairly sure I was experiencing legitimate persecution at the hands of small children. And the self-pity and misery were real. I felt like God was just trying to make my life difficult.

Somewhere late in that first week, the Holy Spirit had had enough. I don't know if my mind is so warped that I could only hear him in a snarky voice because that's my favorite medium of communication, or if He just knew that was the only way to get through to me in that moment. It went down something like this: "Are you done yet? Are you done? I'm really sorry that I, the God of the Universe, ruined your life by moving a bunch of love-starved boys in next door. I just kind of thought that you—a missionary who talks glowingly about being a tangible expression of Christ's love for others—might actually be able to rise to this challenge of loving...children."

I bravely picked myself up off the floor of my emotional temper tantrum and made a commitment to start learning names. That went sort of ok, except there are like five Djibys and one of them looks almost identical to one of the four Mohammeds. But they've all successfully learned my name.

**[Picture 12]** I still get asked for money, but over the past couple of months, our relationships have advanced to the point that I'm typically greeted with a mob of grimy hands wanting high 5s and handshakes as I leave the door. And recently, it's advanced to a bunch of dusty boys giving me hugs in the street. Cute, isn't it?

Again, I'd love to stop the story there, as if occasional hugs in the street could fill up the void of hurt and trauma in their tragic little lives. But sometimes the hand you high-five swings around to slap you.

As I was boarding the plane to come to the US a week ago, I got a call from a friend in my town. He had found my front door pried open and one of my dogs missing. As the day rolled on, I'd get occasional texts updating me on the dog search. It became clear that my neighbor boys were behind the event. See, as they've gotten more comfortable with me, they've gotten more curious about my life, my house, and my slightly over-zealous guard dogs.

They'd seen me leave on Friday, and I even said goodbye to them. So the next morning, when my guard left, they pried my front door open, and then in a scene right out of *Lord of the Flies*, they coaxed or coerced one of my dogs out into the street. The last time an adult saw my dog was a few hours later in a different neighborhood being chased down by a bunch of boys throwing rocks. Somehow she managed to escape and was found a couple days later.

But in those intervening days, I was so ticked with those boys. I imagined the scolding I would give them. The distance I would put between them and me. The withholding of love and affection that would serve

them right. And the Holy Spirit didn't even have to say much this time, I just realized what an awful place I could go to in such a hurry.

But this is the reality. **What happens when you join in reaching one more, and that person turns around and does you wrong?** What happens when God calls you into places that are hard, risky, and maybe even potentially personally damaging? What does the story of Nomadic Faith have to say to us here?

### **Telling Our Story Again**

Remember that I said the author of Hebrews had two goals. The first was to hold Jesus up as having inestimable worth. The second was to remind his readers of the story they were living in.

Nomads live in some of the harshest environments in the world. **[Picture 13]** In Senegal, our temperatures regularly reach 115 degrees F...imagine spending the day out with animals in such heat with little access to water. The Fulani pride themselves on being able to live in areas that no one else wants to or can. And the nomadic life is not easy. Nomads often face rejection and violence from settled communities. (And they can also be the authors of violence against settled communities.) How do they continue on in these difficult circumstances?

They accept that they are different from those around them, and they remind themselves of their story.

Amadou Hampate Ba, an acclaimed Malian Fulani author, wrote a lot about the origin myths of the Fulani. The mythic origin country of the Fulani was called Heli and Yo-Yo. It was a land full of water and grass, ideally suited for the Fulani and their cows. The myth says that somehow the Fulani got lost and have been displaced from this land. But one day, God will lead them back to the country of Heli and Yo-Yo. In Amadou Ba's childhood in the early 1900s, it was not uncommon for Fulani women when in pain or in grief to yell out, "Heli and Yo-Yo." It was as if in these painful moments, they chose to remind themselves of their story—of their past, but also their redemptive future.

Likewise, we see that Abraham lived "like a stranger in a foreign land." He was out of step with those around him—he lived differently, and he accepted that. But how did he keep going? I just wonder if in the months of difficulty that aren't recorded in the Bible, Abraham didn't occasionally question the whole thing. Is it worth following this God? And if I went back? How did he stop from spiraling and giving up?

Hebrews tells us that he was looking forward to a city built by God. In fact, in the last three chapters of Hebrews the author says five different times that people were looking forward to a city, a country, and a kingdom that God would build for His people.

This is the way the author of Hebrews situates us in our story. He reminds us of the end. Yes, we are in a difficult chapter currently, but remember where we are in the story. This is what nomads do. They are one link in the chain of a proud past and a hopeful future...therefore, in the present, they can endure any difficulty.

This morning, have you lost touch with our story? **We are sandwiched between a past in which Christ won an ultimate victory over every dark power on this earth and a future when He will come to live among us, cementing in place that victory.** In our present, we can certainly experience difficulties of every sort, but keep faith and hope alive. He's coming back!

Have you become too settled in another story—one which is primarily about you and your comfort? The author of Hebrews issues us a call to return to a life as faith-filled nomads, following the call of Christ. This is countercultural—we will have to live as foreigners and strangers. But we can do so knowing that one day we will live in a city where our truest selves will fit completely. C.S. Lewis wrote, “If I find in myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world.”

What world, what city were we made for? The answer is on proud display at the end of the Bible, in Revelation 21:2–4:

“I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

### **Conclusion**

[Picture 14] Are you ready to live with Nomadic Faith? Let’s live like Abraham did...making the call of Jesus the center of our stories. Let’s joyfully hold up Jesus as the source of our Good Life to those around us. Let’s reach one more, inviting them to the good life in Jesus. And in those difficult chapters of our lives, let’s remind ourselves how the story ends. We will be together with Jesus, and we will look back on our nomadic lives and think, it was all worth it.