

“Abraham: A Better Country”

Hebrews 11:13-16

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John Denver (some of you remember him) used to sing, “Country roads take me home to the place I belong.” He also sang, “Ain’t it good to be back home again.” Perry Como told us “There is no place like home for the holidays.” And in the Wizard of Oz, Dorothy learned the magic words she needed to repeat were “There is no place like home, there is no place like home.”

A longing for home, for a place we truly feel we belong, is a frequent theme in music, film, literature, and life. The Bible certainly recognizes that longing and sees it as a God given desire. Yet, it makes a surprising claim.

Going home to that place for which we deeply long does not mean returning to somewhere that is full of good memories. Rather it involves arriving at a place we have never been. A place we have never been, yet it is the place where, in one sense, we have always wanted to be and were always meant to be.

Friends, our journey through Hebrews 11 brings us this morning to verses 13-17/ The writer has told is about the faith of Abel, Enoch, Noah, and Abraham. Now, he steps back and makes a summary statement that highlights the heart of biblical faith, the faith these men had, the faith that we, by God’s grace, should want as well. Let’s pause and pray these words from the Lord would both encourage and challenge us today.

Okay, let’s first do a brisk walk through the passage. **Hebrews 11:13a These all died in faith,** (specifically Abel, Enoch, Noah and Abraham) **not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar,** We read this verse last week as we talked about how the thing promised to Abraham by the Lord, was that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky.

Yet, when Abraham died, he had just one son and a couple of grandsons. Though Abraham could not foresee how he could become the father of a great nation, his faith enabled him to believe that is exactly what would happen. That is what faith provides: a confidence that God will keep His word. **Hebrews 11:13b And having**

acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. Not only did these men of faith believe God would keep His promises, they did not really expect Him to do so during their lifetime. They knew this world was not their home. They knew their time there was very temporary.

Hebrews 11:14 For people who speak thus (who consider themselves strangers and exiles) **make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.** Or as the NLT puts it **11:14 Obviously people who say such things are looking forward to a country they can call their own.** A real home. A permanent home.

Hebrews 11:15 If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. Abraham could go back to the land of Ur of the Chaldees, where he had been born and raised. But he would not have been going home. That is not where he truly belonged. There was no place on earth that could truly be home.

Hebrews 11:16a But as it is, they desire a better country, a place that would truly be home, **that is, a heavenly one.** These men of faith understood that this is the better country, this is the true home, not here on earth, but in heaven.

Hebrews 11:16b Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city. The Lord delights in those who trust Him and His word. And He intends to bring them home, to their true home, an eternal city, the new Jerusalem, a city that is like (Revelation 21:2) a bride adorned for her husband. That means magnificently beautiful.

Okay, that is what our text says. Now, let’s turn our focus on what these words mean for us today. **Number 1,** We are strangers on this earth. Strangers and exiles the ESV says. Other versions say aliens, pilgrims, sojourners, foreigners or nomads.

The idea is that we are people who don’t really fit in, don’t really quite belong, because this earth is not our true home. Years ago, I read a book by

Michael Griffiths, former head of OMF, Overseas Missionary Fellowship. I don't remember anything particular from the book other than the title, "God's Forgettable Pilgrims." That phrase always stuck in my mind.

We as Christians, or at least I, as a Christian, have a tendency to forget that we are strangers and exiles. We can become very comfortable, very much at home, with our lives here and now. Even our hopes and dreams tend to focus on things we anticipate obtaining or experiencing in our life there on earth. We kind of end up "settling" here and forget that we are supposed to be on a journey, moving toward our true home.

We are like pioneers in the 1800's who start out for Oregon, and the lush green valleys of the Pacific Northwest, but end up settling in Kansas, mostly because it is easier and seemingly safer. You didn't have to travel in a covered wagon for months. Now, folks, I don't have anything against Kansas. In our current cultural climate, I would much rather live there than Oregon. But, in the 1800's I think I would have preferred Oregon.

The mistake we often make is thinking we will find fulfillment, significant and ultimate joy through something on this earth. When that happens, our desire for that better country begins to fade and we lose sight of that city God has prepared for us.

Instead, your focus might be on a career where you hope to be considered successful. Or maybe you are making a lot of money and trying to buy that house, car, boat, or vacation experience that will really make you happy. Or maybe your tastes are more simple, and you truly enjoy hobbies like fishing, hunting, gardening, cooking, bicycling, or pickle ball and you just like to maximize those experiences. Or perhaps just getting together with family or friends is what you really enjoy. You just cherish those relationships.

Are those things evil? No!! Most of them are good things, very good things. They are gifts from the Lord that we should appreciate. But when your focus on any of these things causes your desire for a better country to diminish, when you forget that none of these things are intended to be the source of your ultimate fulfillment, significance, and joy, then you have a problem. You have become a forgetful pilgrim, you have forgotten you are a stranger on this earth, and your soul will suffer as

a result. You may miss out on blessings the Lord wants you to experience both in this life and the next.

Number 2, This passage reminds that nostalgia has very limited value. Now folks, I love nostalgia. I like to watch TV shows from the 60's, and enjoy music from the 50's, and often listen to radio classics while driving in the car. I tear up sometimes when I cross the county line into Price County, WI, which has been home to most people in my family for almost 150 years.

I love class reunions, family reunions, church reunions and anytime I can get together with old friends and talk about "the good old days." Yet, I realize that memories, though very worthwhile, are still just memories. Time moves in one direction. In reality, we can never go back to a home that once was because that home has changed, just as we have. But that is okay, because going home again is not my goal, and it should not be yours either.

Yes, looking in the rearview mirror is a good thing sometimes. There is much we can learn from the past. In fact, one of the problems of our society today is a failure to know, understand and appreciate our history. Families should know their history; churches should know their history.

But our focus must not be on the rearview mirror. We need to be looking ahead. We need to be focused on today, on tomorrow, and on what God has for us in the future, which is ultimately that better country and the new city He is preparing for us. Yet the key is not necessarily our thoughts about the past or future, but where our hearts are. Do you have a longing for the past, wishing you could somehow go back or recreate a particular time or chapter in your life? Many people do that.

It is often easy to understand why they do. But that is not God's desire. He wants us to be excited about the future, about what God has in store for us today, tomorrow, and in eternity. Yes, we should value the past. But our hearts should be set on a better country, on a city God is preparing, not on nostalgia.

Number 3, Our text reminds us, as one of my friends liked to say, that "we ain't in heaven yet." Yes, the Lord has a better country for us, but we are not there yet. If we understand this, it will

spare us from unnecessary disappointment and some unhealthy theology that some Christians have embraced.

Abraham, like all those who have trusted God in the Old Testament, New Testament, and our own day, received many blessings from God during the years he lived on this earth. Fathering a son when he was 100 years old was certainly one of them.

Each of us as believers in Jesus Christ has also received many blessing from the Lord. If we took time to let you enumerate them, we would come up with quite a list. It would include provisions of food and shelter, often in very generous portions. Some would mention physical health, maybe healing from certain illnesses or just unusual longevity. I think we have seven folks at Chisholm Baptist Church in their 90's who are still able to attend church regularly.

Some would mention success in a business or career. Many would talk about how their family, children, grandchildren, parents, and siblings have brought much joy to their lives. Others would talk about the friendship and encouragement they have found in this congregation, and the love they experience in various ways. And there would be plenty of references to spiritual blessings we have received through Jesus Christ. The Lord has forgiven our sin. Through His Holy Spirit, He is always with us, always there when we need Him. We have the hope of eternal life. We have received many, many gifts from the Lord. There is much for which we can be grateful.

But we must always remember that we ain't in heaven yet. Most of the blessings we enjoy are only temporary and many of them are not guaranteed. Yes, there are wonderful stories of people experiencing God's healing sickness, but there are plenty of other Christians who endure painful ailments for year. Some get sick and die. In fact, those who testify to miraculous healing in their life will die at some point. Lazarus of Bethany had been buried for four days when Jesus raised him from the dead. It was one of the greatest miracles ever. Yet, he later died again, and this time stayed dead.

Interestingly, the Bible doesn't really tell us anything about Lazarus after his resurrection. He is never mentioned in the book of Acts, though

you would think a close friend of Jesus who had been raised from the dead might be an important figure in the early church. Whatever the case, we can be sure that after he was raised by Jesus, Lazarus kept getting older. According to one tradition he was beheaded, but even if he lived to be an old man, he eventually died. Just like all your family members and friends will someday, unless Jesus returns first. All those folks are capable of letting you down, even betraying you, when they are alive. Yet, even if they don't do that, they will die on you, unless, of course, you die first. All human relationships on this earth are temporary.

Yet, when Jesus returns and the day resurrections occur, Lazarus, and all Christian believers will receive, (according to 1 Corinthians 15) glorified, immortal, imperishable bodies. This will be the end of sickness, pain, and death. And with these bodies we will experience eternal life, we will enjoy unending fellowship and love with all of God's people from throughout the ages, including your family members and friends who are believers in Jesus. That is what we often call heaven. It is what the writer of Hebrews calls "a better country," and city prepared for us by God. And no, we ain't there yet. But someday, by His grace, we will be.

"But Pastor Dan, what about those spiritual blessings you mentioned. We do experience them today." Yes, we do, but it is not heaven. Here on earth, our sins are forgiven through Jesus. In heaven, there will be no sin to forgive. We will live in perfect conformity to God's will.

Here on earth, God never leaves us or forsakes us, because He indwells us with His Spirit. In heaven, we will surround the throne of God Himself. **Revelation 21:23 And the city (the city God has prepared for us) has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the lamb.**

Friends, today here on earth, believers in Jesus have the hope of eternal life. But one day, in a better country, in that new city, we will have eternal life.

Friends, don't be surprised or discouraged when your life doesn't happen like you would like, or when illness strikes, or when you have a hard time paying your bills, or when you struggle with

anxiety, or when your children disappoint you, or when a friend betrays you, or when someone you really love dies. We ain't in heaven yet. These things happen in the country where we now live. But we look forward to a better country, a city prepared for us by God.

Number 4, Our text reminds us that because of this, the Lord calls us to be people of hope. Folks, contentment is a virtue. The Lord tells us through the apostle Paul, **1 Timothy 6:6 But godliness with contentment is great gain, and 6:8 But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content.** As my 90-year-old mother with dementia continues to remind me, someone with little cognitive awareness, who is content, can be a happy person.

Yet we need to be careful that our contentment doesn't lead to complacency. We want to make sure our contentment doesn't cause our desire for a better country to diminish or make us lose site of the city God has prepared for us. A certain, unhealthy type of contentment makes us satisfied with "good enough," when things really are not good.

As I noted a few minutes ago, there is a danger of becoming too comfortable with a world that is not our true home. We always want there to be a little discomfort because the world in which we live, through full of goodness and beauty, is also corrupted, often in rebellion against God, and frequently opposed to what is true, right and good.

With that reality in mind, I don't think we should be content about this. We should be troubled. For example, I don't have all the answers, but knowing there were about 900,000 abortions in the United States last year is something that disturbs me. The fact most Americans apparently are not disturbed by that may be even more disturbing. And that is just one example. There is so much around us that is not as it should be. We should experience a holy discontent. But...it shouldn't stop there.

One of my favorite songs the past couple of year has been "Is He Worthy" by Christ Tomlinson/Andrew Peterson. The words are so powerful.

Do you feel the world is broken?

(We do)

Do you feel the shadows deepen?

(We do)

But do you know that all the dark won't Stop the light from getting through?

(We do)

Do you wish that you could see it all made new?

(We do)

Is all creation groaning?

(It is)

Is a new creation coming?

(It is)

Is the glory of the Lord to be the light within our midst?

(It is)

Is it good that we remind ourselves of this?

(It is)

Yes, folks, it is so good that we remind ourselves of this. Because, yes, even though the world is broken, with the shadows deepening and creation groaning, we don't need to despair. A new creation is coming. The glory of the Lord will be the light within our midst.

Those are just other words describing a better country, a city God is preparing for us. It is good that we frequently remind ourselves not only of the brokenness of this world, but of the hope that we have because of God's promises that we have been given through Jesus.

In fact, that should be key in each our lives, not just contentment, no just a "Holy discontent," but hope, a solid, magnificent hope, grounded in the triune God, in who He is, and in what He has done, is doing, and promises to do for us as believers in Jesus Christ.

Friends may the Lord help us to be people of hope, even as we wait for a better country and not lose focus as we look forward to our true home that God is preparing for us.