

Searching for Home
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16
First Presbyterian Church
August 11, 2019

Introduction

One thing before we read our text for the day. Though Hebrews is called a letter, it is really more of a sermon... a very loooong sermon! And in this sermon the preacher is trying very hard to encourage his congregation to remain steadfast and to persevere through difficult times. For them, following Jesus was costly! Some may have been martyred... others had been imprisoned or had their possessions plundered... most all experienced hostility, ridicule and shame simply because they followed Jesus.¹ This preacher knows that, above everything else, his people need hope. And so, he tries to give them hope by reminding them of their ancestors... their forbearers in faith. God made promises to them, he proclaims, and those promises gave them hope. And even though they did not see those promises completely fulfilled, still they were faithful and obedient during their lives... and will see them fulfilled in heaven.

Prayer for Illumination

Now faith is
the assurance of things hoped for,
the conviction of things not seen.
We come convinced of many things
but trusting very few.

Holy God, meet us here in this place... in this word...
that we might touch that which we cannot see...
and trust in that which we have not dared to hope.

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible. By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. ¹²Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, “as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by

¹ John C. Shelley in his essay on this text in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 3, p. 328.

the seashore.”¹³All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth,¹⁴for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.¹⁵If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return.¹⁶But 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.

Sermon

By all accounts I had a pretty normal childhood.² With my mom, dad, and two sisters, I lived in a nice suburban home in Atlanta. My sisters and I went to an excellent elementary school... we all went to church twice on Sundays and every Wednesday night. We weren't rich but were very well provided for – we had plenty of presents at Christmas and took vacations in the summer. My parents loved each other and us kids the best they could... so all in all, I had a pretty normal childhood. But then, in the summer of my 11th year things changed for us. It began when my father suffered a grand mal seizure at one of my little league baseball games. Over the next decade, he struggled to run a successful construction business and to manage a chronic illness. At times he was over medicated by his doctors and at other times he over medicated himself. My mom did her best to care for him and to raise three kids. Yet, at some point she, a good Southern Baptist girl who had never touched alcohol, began to drink heavily. My little sisters struggled with drugs and with school. And though I was a pretty responsible kid, I was not perfect by any stretch of the imagination... sometimes far from it.

My point in telling you this is that as a teenager... when all of this was going on with us, I remember feeling like my home was coming apart at the seams... that my family was unraveling before my eyes... and that there was nothing I could do about it.

Now, a psychotherapist might say that my decision to become a pastor was a way of dealing with the brokenness. That doesn't mean I'm not qualified or gifted... it doesn't nullify my call from God. What it does mean is that perhaps God used the chaos and brokenness of my family to encourage me to stay in church and even to shape my ministry in the future. I've thought a lot about that and do believe there is some truth there. There definitely IS a sense in which I am still searching for something that was lost many years ago... and one way to put this is: I am still searching for “home.”

Now, when we turn to the Bible, we find that our true home is not the place where we grew up. It's not the place we live now, regardless of how much we may love it. And it's not the dream house we may be planning to build sometime out in the future.

² The telling of these things and much of the rest of this sermon is inspired by the first pages of *Searching for Home: Spirituality for Restless Souls* by M. Craig Barnes (Brazos Press, 2004), pages 1-35.

In the Bible our real home is where we were first created to live... where we were meant to be in a delightful garden in which water and food was plentiful, the fields and trees were abundant, and the work of tending to all of it was deeply fulfilling. Our real home is where we were naked and not ashamed... where we enjoyed relationships with God and with one another that met our deepest needs. It was, as we say, Paradise.

The problem was that at the time we didn't realize it was Paradise. All we knew was there was something forbidden in the middle of that garden... something we wanted but were told we could not have. And so, we wondered to ourselves (with a little help from a snake), how could this could possibly be paradise if we do not have everything we want?

Well, you know the story – the serpent convinced us that this good creation was not quite good enough... and that all it needed was just one teeny-tiny home improvement. So, we took the freedom God made us with... freedom to either bow before God or listen to the serpent... and we set about recreating the garden according to our standards.

There were consequences, of course... God had warned us there would be. And when Adam and Eve left the Garden, we're told that God placed an angel with a flaming sword at the eastern gate. It's the Bible's way of saying that all of life is now being lived east of Eden... that the Paradise we were created for has been lost and that there is no returning to that home. And since we cannot return, we wander through this life on the other side of the guarded gates; all the while longing deeply for our true home.

You and I express this longing in any number of ways. We move around – whether it's across the street, across the state, or across the country, more than one in ten of us will move in a given year. Maybe the next city... the more lucrative job... the bigger house... the new car... the vacation getaway... the next relationship... maybe that will give us what we most want. But it never quite works out that way. Because before long we realize the new place isn't perfect... the new job has all the pressures we thought we had left behind. The bigger salary is still not enough, and the bigger house is still not home. And we wonder WHY? The answer of the Scriptures to this deeper question is that we walked away from Paradise and have been wandering around ever since. From Adam and Eve who long to go back to Abraham and Sarah who leave home in search of a promised land... to the Hebrews stuck in exile over in Babylon... to the prodigal son who finds himself in a pig sty. Throughout the Bible men and women are roaming from one place to another... from one experience to another... never truly at home wherever they are... wondering if they will ever find where they are meant to be.

And so, it is with us as well... whenever we talk about a deep hurt in our marriage or a breach in the relationship with one of our kids... It's what we mean when we share the overwhelming grief and loneliness of losing a spouse... when we question what our calling in life really is... when we mourn for a world that seems hell bent on violence and destruction.

We may not put it in so many words... we may not call it "homesickness" ... but we know things just don't make sense... that things are just not right! We know that we are not home! Because our home is Paradise. Well, this is what the preacher is addressing when he says that our forbearers in faith were seeking a homeland. Only the homeland they were seeking was not some place they had lived before and left behind. If it was, they could simply go back home. No, what they desired was a better country... that is, a heavenly one. Those who are made in eternity will always long for eternity... so the true home for which we all are searching is a place called heaven.

Heaven.

When is the last time you heard a sermon on heaven? There was a day, not too long ago, when the church was accused of being so "heavenly minded" we were no earthly good... but that day has passed. Now we preachers knock ourselves out trying to be relevant to the pressing issues of daily life... so much so that I fear we need to hear again the apostle's words: "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied."³ In our defense, we might point out that heaven is not really what you might say is "a major topic" in the Bible. Scripture doesn't go into any great detail about where it is and what it's like, but that doesn't mean believing in heaven is not important... it is!⁴ Believing in heaven is very important... if for no other reason than it makes a real difference for our life on earth. I don't know about you, but I believe. I choose to take the Bible at its word – that there is a real place called heaven – and that it is more real and beautiful than anything on earth. I believe God gives us the victory of eternal life, both now and forever. I believe, as John Calvin said, "Christ rose again that he might have us as companions in the life to come."⁵ And that, my friends, makes a difference in my life on this earth. It makes a difference to believe that God will wipe every tear from their eyes... that death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.⁶ It makes a difference to believe that heaven is a place where we will put on our new, spiritual bodies (our "resurrection bodies") and that with them we will exist with God eternally.⁷ It makes a difference to believe that I will eventually stop my wandering... stop trying to make the things of this life into home... and that I will find my true place. Though the Bible doesn't give us all the details, the Bible does say that heaven exists... that Heaven is our home... and that it will be good – when the time comes – to finally arrive there.

³ 1 Corinthians 15:19

⁴ Barnes, p.181

⁵ *Institutes* 3.25.3

⁶ Revelation 21:4

⁷ 1 Corinthians 15:44

Yet, until then... BEFORE heaven is a place we will eventually arrive at, it is found in a relationship with God. And the very good news I have for you today – in addition to the promise of heaven – is that though you and I have walked away from God, God has not walked away from us. Though we have broken the sacred communion we once had with God, in Jesus of Nazareth God has reached across the breach and repaired that sacred communion. And even though we will never find our true home on this side of heaven, God is always gracious... and gives us glimpses and experiences of heaven along the way. For our God is One who is on the move himself... who refuses to settle down or stay in exile for too long... who is not afraid to enter the messy world that is just outside the gate... who is relentless in his passion to find us, homeless and homesick as we are, so that he might join us on our journey. And when we awaken to this One who is always with us, we discover that in our search for Paradise, paradise has found us. And in this rests, all our hope.

Let us pray:

O Holy One, we thank you for the privilege of standing in a long line of believers who have been faithful through the ages. You have been our constant companion - leading us through trial and difficulty and setting before us hope for today and hope for a better tomorrow. We pray that you would bless us in our time as we seek to be as faithful as our forebears. May we too know the faith which is filled with hope in things not seen.

- Give to us a faith like the grain of mustard seed which had small beginnings, but which yielded large results.
- Give to us the faith to move the mountains of difficulty which come to each of us.
- Give to us the faith that sees a distant goal and is willing to work to achieve it.
- Give to us a faith which has a vision of a new world where peace and love are more than ideas and where war is no more.
- Give to us a faith such as Abraham and Sarah to move forward not knowing our destination but trusting in your guiding providence.
- Give to us a faith which is able to endure our personal challenges, our losses, our temptations... and to trust that you are with us.
- Give to us a faith which sees the welfare of all people as our business because it is your business.
- Give to us a faith which sees beyond the years to an eternal city... to a house not made with hands... to our heavenly home where with you and all of your saints we might live in everlasting love.

These prayers we make in the name of Jesus... and continue to pray as he taught us: Our Father...