



The Westminster Pulpit

Sermons Preached at Westminster Presbyterian Church
3900 West End Avenue Nashville, Tennessee 37205-1899

“Desire a Better Country” **Sermon on Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16**

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Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
August 7, 2022

The book of Hebrews is a sermon. A sermon can seem like it comes off God's holy mountain. “This is what God says! Do it!”

But there is also a sermon that identifies with how the congregation is feeling and doing. This sermon of the Hebrews understands that the congregation is exhausted. Ready to chuck it all in and return to the synagogue; perhaps, all will be forgiven, and we can get on with life.

Are there times when you want to check your faith at the door?

Exchanging “sacrifice” for “self-preservation.”
Exchanging “kindness” for “rudeness.”
Exchanging “mission” for “me first.”
Exchanging “mercy” for “revenge.”
Exchanging Jesus for a bag of silver.

This is the battle we engage in on God's green earth. The good news is there is a better country, a heavenly one.

From Hebrew 11: 1-4, 8-16

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ²Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. ³By 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.

⁴By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's. Through this he received approval as righteous, God himself giving approval to his gifts; he died, but through his faith he still speaks.

⁸By 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. ⁹ By 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. ¹⁰ For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹ By faith, with Sarah's involvement, he received power of procreation, even though he was too old, because he considered him faithful who had promised. ¹² Therefore 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 the seashore."

¹³ All 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, ¹⁴ for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ 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.

A little over a week ago, I was with my son and 15,000 of our closest friends, riding bikes across Iowa. The weather was cool. Praise the Lord. The Iowa wind was a tailwind. Praise the Lord.

With a good day and a tailwind, you can forget most of the problems of this land. When I got home, I turned on the TV, and immediately came the political ads. Every politician spreading fear and negativity, promising a way to a better country.

It was 420 miles of peddle, peddle, peddle, and one always arrives at whatever is next – every single time.

Highlights included:

A guy who can throw a pancake clear across the room and on to your Styrofoam plate.

A farmer who wanted to hand you a piglet to hold.

A woman who pointed to the best strawberry rhubarb pie, "I made it myself."

Corn on the cob. Need I say more?

A mother and her two young daughters were sitting on lawn chairs in the middle of a gravel road that separated corn from beans. Corn and beans, as far as you could see. They were handing out cold water to the riders. I suspect we were the first adults that mother had spoken to in years. We were real celebrities, and it was great. Nothing like being a celebrity.

In their basement Fellowship Hall, a Presbyterian Church served pork loin with a side of red Jell-O. Actually, there were four Presbyterian churches that served pork loin

with a side of red Jell-O. Some things never get old. Is this heaven? No, It's Iowa. It's quite a country.

I know none of it is real. It's a week-long bike ride. An event. All in a good mood. And every one of the people we met – from the woman handing out pie to the farmer with the pig – probably has some real problems. Some restlessness. Some sadness. I suppose some hope for a better country. But it was all covered up by the event, the glorious weather, and the breeze.

We're good at covering things up.

I often encounter people who "church shop" from time to time. Most recently, I met a man who said, "I like the church well enough, but the people there seem like they have it all together."

Lord, I wish they had it all together! But, let me tell you, there are people who struggle with their purpose in life. There are mothers and fathers who pray for the health of their children. People who struggle with their identity. Children who are trying to figure out what's best for their parents. Couples who are struggling with their marriages. People who weep.

It may look like we have it all together, but deep down inside we all long for a better country." A heavenly one.

And the operative pronoun there is "we." That we do this together. We long for it together. That we bring everyone with us. That a better country doesn't come by eliminating some, and by doing so, being able to say there isn't enough to go around. No! It's not scarcity we long for, it's abundant land. To be filled, to be whole.

We long for a better country. I could not do ministry alone. But I have great colleagues. I have you. I have the opportunity to share in the great lives of others, and usually at their funerals. Every single person who comes forth, and I am able to speak about their lives, and it's amazing!

I think of Shep Criegler, who at one time, worked closely with a Sexton whose job it was to fill the Baptismal font, make sure the air conditioner was working, keep the carpets clean, and on and on. And when the Sexton asked to go to church, Shep said he would ask the Session. The problem was that the Sexton was black. Shep brought the request to the Session, telling them about this Sexton who did so much for us, asking if he could attend a service. The Session said no. But that didn't stop Shep, longing for a better country.

Barbara Haynes. I did her service not long ago. A Judge. She became a Judge because she was a lawyer, and during one case, met a Judge who was so mean and belittling of her client, saying the worst possible things. She decided it had to stop and it would stop on her watch. Justice. We do it together.

This week I listened to Chad Folk give the eulogy for his father, Jodie. Jodie died of Alzheimer's. What an awful disease, where the victim leaves the home country and

travels into a land where nothing is known, nothing remembered. If he's your dad, you travel into that unknown land along with him.

Chad said that he would sit beside his father on his bed and recite the 23rd Psalm to him over and over again. And then there came the day when his father no longer moved his lips as Chad read the words.

Alzheimer's took the words from his mouth.

Now, only the son says the words. But Chad said, "It wasn't just me. I was surrounded by the great cloud of witnesses, my friends, the people in the church, all who were saying the words with me.

We long for a better country.

Last week it was 70 degrees in Iowa and in the 90's here, which means that it was raining somewhere in between. The land in between is called Kentucky. I received a few emails from folks wondering if we had a plan to help with recovery from the floods. What do you say? A recession is looming. Inflation is high. Money is tight. We're unsure if we're going to make the budget. Who knows how the church is doing after Covid? Scared. What do you think? Don't you get tired of these things that happen all the time? Floods, fires. We're exhausted!

When does a church stop being a church? When we are called to self-preservation. Our call is to the cross. Death does not have the last word. God does. The words are "rise up!" They come to all of us, and we lean into a better country. We can taste it. We can see it. It comes from the mouth of God. A better country is the next step of faith.

It was heaven for the woman who, after the Kentucky flood, opened her door to see the body of Christ assembled on her doorstep. "I thought God had just about given up on me." No, ma'am! No, ma'am!

We long for a better country!

We! We! We! It is the backbone of Westminster. "To whom much is given, much is expected."

We long for a better country, a heavenly one. It is so near that we can taste it. It's a country of abundance, where there's plenty to eat and drink and where the table gets another leaf, and we find a few more chairs. It's a country where grace is spoken before, during, and after every meal. Grace and mercy upon mercy. It's the better country. Don't give up.

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