

# The Heirs of Repentance and the Longing for Home

## Opening

The last few weeks we have meditated on Colossians and I'd like to remain focused on the Epistle reading through August. Back in January at our annual meeting, I shared my intention to meditate on what it means to be the church. The cry for community is a deep longing in our time and I believe the Church of Jesus Christ—with all its brokenness, messiness, and issues—remains the ark of salvation. The church has often been compared with Noah's ark. One priest said of the ark *and* the church, 'it's crowded and messy in there, but it's built to save us.' Not just save you, save *us*.

I'm drawn to the Epistle readings these days because we see in the letters of Paul, the letter to the Hebrews, the other letters in the New Testament, how Christians are working out who they are and how they will live in light of the death, resurrection, and return of Jesus Christ. There's a lot of wrestling in the Epistles because there's a desire to find the mind of Christ, not abstractly, but with real issues, new issues where there's no obvious script about what to do.

We're coming round to this theme of the Church later in 2019 than I expected, but that's ok. One remembers the wisdom of Proverbs in moments such as these, "The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps." So perhaps we come to this theme in God's good timing, always better than mine.

So today and the two Sundays following we will be in the Letter to the Hebrews. The Letter to the Hebrews is especially trying to work out who we are and where we're going in light of Israel's story. Christ is greater than all revealed in the Old Testament, but now what? What does that mean about us? What does that mean about the future? I invite you to return to page ### in your pew Bible as we look at Hebrews 10.39-Hebrews 11.16. This Sunday, in particular, I want us to consider how our ancestors lead us onward to our homeland in Christ.

## Those Who Do Not Shrink Back

We come to a well-loved chapter in Scripture this morning, yet we need to hear Hebrews 11, not from verse 1, but from the final verse of chapter 10: 'But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.' The writer of Hebrews (the writer never shares his name) sees all that these early Christians suffered. They "endured a hard struggle with sufferings," "publicly reproached in affliction." They "joyfully accepted the plundering of their property." But they were weakening in the midst of all this testing.

Do you ever have conversations in your family where someone says, "this is *not* who we are." Or, "this *is* who we are!" That's the kind of response the writer gives to these early Christians. "We are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls." It's like the holy version of the straight talk we heard from our baseball coach when we were down late in the game. "Boys, it's time to dig down deep, grab a hold of those gut strings, and pull 'em tight." "We are not of those who *shrink back*."

## Hall of Fame?

Secondly, let's talk about this chapter's infamous nickname: 'the hall of fame' of faith. I think there are unintended problems with that picture. A hall of fame is a museum. I've never been to Cooperstown, NY, but I'm quite sure that I would enjoy perusing memorabilia of Red Sox greats like Ted Williams and Cy Young, gloves, bats, and hats from teams like as the 2004 World Series Champions. But all those items would be enclosed in glass, inaccessible to me. I pass from room to room, passing through a history of which I'm not a direct participant. I might say I'm a member of Red Sox Nation, but I've never stepped between the lines of Fenway Park for nine innings. I'm an observer, a spectator, not a participant.

Instead of speaking about a 'hall of fame,' I hope we might read Hebrews 11 and say, 'here is our ancestry.' The communion of saints is not a museum, there are no exhibits encased in glass. Hebrews 11 is the house of our fathers and mothers. This is *our history, the real history* of our spiritual ancestry, a mystical communion of the departed with the living.

If you have a family member who is researching your ancestry, you know the excitement of discovering your roots. If you have seen the script of great-great grandparents recording their names in a marriage registry, a voter registry, an immigration record from Ellis Island, you're inspired

to explore their story because you intuitively *believe* their story is connected to the *your* story. Their artifacts are not just interesting, they are personal.

## An Heir of Repentance

When you explore your ancestry, you inevitably discover stories knit with your own story. One story I heard growing up was how my namesake, Jack King, Sr. (I'm the third), attended Vanderbilt Divinity School in the 1960s where he was a classmate of the civil rights leader, James Lawson. There was great pride that my grandfather trained for ministry in a time and place of restoring justice to African-Americans.

When I was a teenager I became curious about my grandfather's story regarding life in America before his Vanderbilt days. One day I asked him how he, his family, and his neighbors related with African-Americans. I will always remember this conversation. He paused, let out a great sigh, and spoke through a broken voice, with tears welling in his eyes. 'I threw rocks.' And he wasn't alone. He was caught up in a collective act of racial violence in his community.

You must understand I grew up in a 'turn the other cheek' family. I didn't think my family was *capable* of violence of any kind when I was young. / I am two generations removed from acts of racial violence.

There are moments in every child's life where you lose innocence. Here was a *shattering* moment. Yet I don't remember the shame so much as I remember his quaking voice and his tears. He did not *shrink back* from the truth.

So when I hear news of racial violence in our time, in El Paso, Charleston, Charlottesville, it is not too long before I remember Jack Sr.'s quaking voice and tear-filled eyes. His godly sorrow led to a life of repentance. I do not know how he specifically learned racism in his childhood, but I do know he labored to prevent the sins of our fathers, the sin of Cain hating his brother, Abel, continuing to the next generation.

I'm sure a sociologist might hear my family story and call this 'white guilt,' but actually, I'm telling you a story rooted in our father Abraham. Abraham took left his father's house, left their idols and false gods, and sojourned to a place where the living God would reveal a vision. And to our father Abraham, God revealed to Abraham that he would be the father of *many* nations, children as numerous as the stars in the sky. So, no, this isn't white guilt. This is ancestral sin, but also ancestral

*repentance*, thanks be to God, redeemed by the God of Abraham and Jesus Christ. You see, I am the heir of my grandfather's tears. I am the heir of his repentance.

One day, when the time is right, I will tell my daughter and my son that they are the heirs of their grandfather's repentance. I pray that when my children are fully grown that across this land there will have been a deep and profound repentance from violent words and violent actions against any tribe or tongue or nation made in the image of the God of Abraham and our Lord Jesus Christ.

## Heroes and Hebrew Stories

We're reading the Letter to the Hebrews, but the greatest difference about Hebrew stories from all other nations is that they told the truth about their father's failures. Assyrian, Egyptian, or Persian chroniclers would have the royal editor take out all the unflattering or embarrassing events about their kings. They would suppress the truth. Not so with Israel. Hebrews tell the failures of their fathers even as they laud their faith.

We read about the heroic faith here in Hebrews about Noah, Abraham, Jacob, and Sarah, but the stories of great faith passed down told the truth about their great failures too. Noah got drunk and shamed his family and his God; Abraham lied at a crucial moment of his sojourn; Jacob deceived his way into an inheritance; and Sarah laughed when she heard a prophetic word about bearing a son.

We don't hear those details in Hebrews, but the writer doesn't need to spell out their life story. Their names worked like triggers for the each narrative. You say the name Johnny Cash and you think of his songs, but for many Americans, the mention of his name *also* invokes his life story—his rise from poverty and an abusive household; his addiction to drugs and his broken marriage; his affection and deep identification for the poor, the hungry, and the prisoner as the Man in Black; his humble faith in the Lord Jesus. Names activate narratives for us.

So it is with the names of our fathers and mothers in Hebrews. We see their heroic faith *summarized*, but underneath they were flawed heroes. Better still, *redeemed* heroes. They acquired heroic faith within and on the other side of tremendous failures.

## The Triumph of Faith over Failure

Yet it is not their failures that define them, but their faith. So what is the *quality* of their faith? Faith can sound abstract. What does it *really* mean? Let the writer of Hebrews speak on his own terms. Verses 13-14: Our ancestors' faith meant that they "acknowledged they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear they are seeking a homeland." Continuing with verse 16: "But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one." To live by faith means that I'm pursuing a better country, I'm seeking a homeland.

I think of more recent ancestor in faith, the great Rich Mullins, who sang these words about America: "Nobody tells you when you get born here how much you'll come to love it and how you'll never belong here. So I'll call you my country, but I'll be longing for my home."

To long for a better country, a different homeland, is not a rejection of this world or this country. It is to live the aching prayer, "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven." It is to fix your eyes on the coming King and the heavenly City whose designer and builder is God. That heavenly city, designed and built by God, is not in a different world, but for *this* world. But until Christ returns to establish that city on earth, we will be strangers and exiles in this world.

Still I learn how to live as a stranger and exile, when I hear Rich Mullins sing: "I'm home anywhere if you are where I am." That, to me, is the other hallmark of faith. We do not despair when we experience strangeness and exile in this world. We greet the Lord's present and coming Kingdom, the heavenly City, even while it is still far off. We greet the heavenly City from afar, living here and now based on the coming Kingdom, for "faith is the assurance of things hoped, the conviction of things not seen." As Jeremiah said to his people in exile, so we could live by faith as strangers and exiles in our day: "Build houses and plant gardens and eat their produce. Seek the peace of the city where I have sent you in exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find welfare." <sup>1</sup>That is how we greet the heavenly city from afar, just like our ancestors did, even though *this* world is *not yet* our home.

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah 29.11

## Greeting Home from Afar

On the 23rd of December 1616, the navigator and spice trader Nathanael Courthope (an excellent surname, it must be charted), charted his location. His destination was Run Island in the East Indies, yet more than ten miles from making landfall, the scent of nutmeg filled the ship he captained, the *Swan*. Courthope had no visual of the mountain island that would soon appear in his viewing; he *smelled* the island before he saw it, the aroma of his destination.<sup>2</sup>

When your course is set to the heavenly City whose designer and builder is God, we sojourn without a visual sighting, but you can greet that country from afar when the sweet fragrance of God's holiness and goodness suddenly steals upon you. For we are seeking that homeland with our ancestors who lived by faith; with all sojourners in Christ of every tribe, tongue, and nation, "as many as the innumerable sands of the seashore"; for the glory and worship of the King who reigns forever, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Giles Morton, *Nathanael's Nutmeg*, Prologue.