

A Homeland That Fits Our Faith
Psalm 33:12-22 Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16
August 11, 2019

Psalm 33 verse 12 says, *“Happy is the nation whose God is the LORD, the people whom he has chosen as his heritage.”* Our reading from Hebrews speaks of Abraham and Sarah and their pilgrimage to find the homeland God promised to them, the homeland they longed for. They were willing to live in tents, unsettled until God told them it was the right place and the right time because they were looking for something more. Hebrews puts it this way, *“For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”* I love the sound of this. I love to imagine what it might look like to live in a city that was designed and built by God. It takes patience to wait for this. It takes patience to live in a place where it is difficult to find any signs of God’s presence, let alone a place that has been designed and built according to God’s specifications.

In our very human lives, we make attempts to find and create places that have this deep sense of belonging. If you went to Rutland’s National Night Out in Giorgetti Park on Tuesday, you may have caught a glimpse of something like this. Over the course of the summer, you may have found something like it at a concert on the green in one of the towns around here, or at a local theater event, or even just sitting on a bench at the park. Maybe the search for this kind of homeland is what brought you to church this morning? Maybe this is where you feel a sense of being at home, a sense of peace?

It can be difficult to find a place that helps us to feel at peace these days. The shootings in El Paso and Dayton make us question our safety in all public places. The stabbings in California and the violence on our own streets put us on edge no matter where we go. Hebrews talks about people like Abraham and Sarah walking through the world feeling like strangers wherever they went. They felt like foreigners, and could not find a place where they truly belonged. As I read their story, I feel a kinship with them, and maybe you do as well? This world, this culture, does not feel like home to us. It does not feel comfortable. We don’t feel like we can settle in. We don’t dare to let our guard down or relax, because there is so much about this world that is *not* in keeping with the kind of place God would design, the kind of homeland where our faith is at ease and where we can live in peace.

A piece of what is happening might be that we have forgotten how to create communities. Are we so determined to hold onto our individual rights that we have lost the ability to take someone else’s needs into account? On Saturday morning as I was writing this sermon, Gary read me a news article about a man who decided to test his 2nd amendment rights by walking into a Walmart wearing camouflage and a bullet proof vest and carrying two loaded guns. He wanted to find out what store management *said* about being allowed to carry weapons, and then test it out to see if they actually lived up to their policies when he showed up in person. It is not against the law in Missouri to carry guns, but it is against the law to do so in a threatening way. The tricky part of this is that each of us perceives things differently. What is threatening to one may not be so to another person, so the question becomes, do we think about others and what makes them feel safe, or do we run ahead with our own ambitions?

What would it look like to live in a world in which everyone felt at home? What would it take for everyone to feel safe and not only physically safe, but emotionally safe as well? I think that the kind of security and sense of belonging we are all looking for is one that runs deeper than mere physical safety. It is more than just having a roof over our heads and food in our bellies, although these things are a great start. For us to feel at home, especially as people of faith, we need to be in a place where prayer is not seen as weird or strange, where looking to God for help is a normal response to a difficult time. I have to confess that at times I feel self-conscious when I ask if someone would like me to pray with them, because

prayer is not a common way of handling our lives. In many situations, I have been told that I was looking at things in an unrealistic way because I was being too positive or because I kept expecting the best of other people.

The common sense approach to life seems to be that we should not depend on anyone except ourselves, or maybe that we can grudgingly trust one or two people because they have proven themselves to us over time. But this kind of thinking shrinks our world pretty fast. It doesn't allow much room for us to interact with new ideas or to get to know new people. I am willing to bet that each and every one of us has been involved in a group at one time or another that said they wanted us to join them. We may have felt welcomed at first, but when we attempted to contribute our ideas, they let us know in no uncertain terms that they were not really interested in doing things any differently. When this happens, it becomes clear that we may be tolerated as a member, but our contributions are not sought after, nor are they valued. When we participate in building community, it is important that each person feels that she or he is a respected and appreciated member of the circle, that each and every person has a voice in the group's deliberations. This can be really difficult for an established group to manage, just as it is challenging for individuals who attempt to join the group. Churches have to learn this lesson over and over again, as new people get excited about what God is doing in their lives and want to participate in what the congregation is doing. *I used to think I should only let people who could read smoothly and well be liturgists, but then I heard Reverend Nadia Bolz-Webber speak. She founded a church out in Denver where they encouraged anyone and everyone who wanted to, to serve as liturgist or in any other capacity in the church they felt emboldened to try. In fact, they printed up cards that listed the various roles needed for each service such as liturgist, communion server, offering collector, greeter, and people could pick up a card when they arrived for worship, and then carry out that role for the service. She said she realized that it was more important for people to feel that they had a home in the church, and a respected role in the congregation, than it was for the worship service to go off without a hitch. In fact, I have often found that laughing with one another at the hitches helps to create a stronger sense of community.*

I believe that we are all searching for a homeland. We are, each of us, longing to find a place where we are welcomed. We want a community where we can be ourselves in an honest way. We long for a place where we can admit it when we are confused or hurting or lonely, and someone will hear us, will hold us, will pray with us and will simply be with us. The thing is, that it takes all of us to create this kind of community. Each of us has to be committed to making it happen for everyone who walks in the door of the church, but we also have to work at making the community around us into the kind of place we long for as well. With God as the architect, may we participate in building a community that is truly welcoming to each and every person whose soul longs for home.

Loving God, we want you to be the architect of all that we build here in this church, this community and this world. Help us to pay attention to your designs. Help us to put others first, and to listen carefully to what other people in our community need, what they dream about. Help us build the community you envision. Help us create a space where everyone who enters feels a sense of ease and acceptance. May we all find our home in You and create a sense of home here in this place for all people. In Jesus' name and in his sense of hospitality we pray, Amen.