

“Our Heavenly Home”

Hebrews 11:8-16, 39-40

November 20, 2016

Almost 30 years ago, PBS produced a 14 part television series on the Civil Rights Movement in America. The title of the series was “Eyes on the Prize.” The title was taken from new words given to an old spiritual, “Keep Your Hand on the Plow.” The new words, “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize. Hold on; Hold on,” became a powerful song of the movement. The prize, of course, was freedom, justice and equal rights under the law. Keeping focused on the prize gave many who struggled for civil rights in America the faith to endure discrimination, loss of work, rejection, beatings and imprisonment for the sake of the prize.

When God calls us to follow Jesus, we begin a journey that leads us from where we are to where God wants us to be. The disciples followed Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem; then in the power of the Spirit after the resurrection of Jesus, they went into the Roman world with the good news. Their journey was never finished until Jesus received them into their heavenly home. We are on a pilgrimage to the kingdom of God. Most of us know that the path is never straight. There are ups and downs; there are times we wander in the dark; there are moments of great challenge, disappointment, grief and hardship. There are rocky roads and mountain passes. The children of Israel wandered in the wilderness for forty years until they reached the Promised Land. As we go, we keep our eyes on the prize and we hold on. We hold on to the vision of our heavenly home and the final reconciliation of all things in Christ.

In the 11th chapter of Hebrews we hear the stories of some of the great figures of the Hebrew Bible who answered the call of God. Abraham and Sarah left their family and their homeland to follow God into an unknown country and into an unknown future. In faith, they trusted God because they knew that God had promised them a new homeland. Even though they passed through the land that they were promised to receive as an inheritance, they lived in tents as “strangers and foreigners on the earth.” Abraham and Sarah knew that God had something more in mind. The generations of the faithful who followed them lived in faith keeping their eyes on God and trusting in God to provide for them. They endured much and accomplished

much. The author says:

“...through faith [they] conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented - of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains and in caves and holes in the ground” (11: 33-38).

One thing they did not do was to give up. They never gave up. They never gave up because they knew that God had planned and prepared something better for them. They desired “a better country, that is, a heavenly one.” They were able to be faithful because they kept their eyes on the prize.

We do not give up. Our vision of our heavenly home gives us the strength and courage to be faithful in our daily living because we know the end and the outcome of all things. When we die, we go to be with Jesus. As he said to the thief on the cross, “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” We leave this world of time and change and enter into God’s eternity. Eternity is not so much endless time, but the end of time when past, present and future are one. The end is the transformation not just of our individual lives in the resurrection, but the transformation of the whole cosmos. Time is a part of the created order. When we leave the world of time and space, we enter the kingdom, the eternal city of God.

In the last chapters of the Book of Revelation, we are given a vision of the heavenly kingdom, pictured as the new Jerusalem, the city of God. John envisions the marriage of heaven and earth which is the final transformation of all things. At the end, God will wipe away every tear from our eyes and death shall be no more. The language of Revelation

is metaphorical and highly symbolic, because John is given a vision of something greater than our minds can grasp or our human language express.

Dr. Jim Riley is leading a study group on the New Testament scholar N. T. Wright's book, *Following Jesus*. The author writes about the reality of heaven:

“Heaven isn't, therefore, an escapist dream, to be held out as a carrot to make people better behaved; just as God isn't an absentee landlord who looks down from a great height to see what his tenants are doing and to tell them they mustn't. Heaven is the extra dimension, the God-dimension, of all our present reality; and the God who lives there is present to us, present with us, sharing our joys and our sorrows, longing as we are longing for the day when God's whole creation, heaven and earth together, will perfectly reflect God's love, wisdom, justice and peace (p. 106).”

What we believe about heaven motives us to live faithfully today. The belief in our heavenly home brings us comfort in the death of our loved ones and in the face of our own death. Belief in our heavenly home also inspires us to work today to make the earth a little more like heaven. Heaven is all around us whenever people act in love, share a crust of bread, forgive a neighbor, tutor a child, comfort the sick, stand up to a bully, give to those in need, and protect the stranger among us. In all these ways we catch glimpses of heaven shining through the darkness of our world. This is why Jesus says in the gospels that the Kingdom is among and within us. It may only be experienced in momentary flashes, but these moments remind us that our heavenly home is real. It is the ultimate destination of all our journeys.

The passage we read from Hebrews tells the stories of so many faithful Hebrews who made this journey to the heavenly city. The passage is known as the “Roll Call of the Faithful.” Hebrews ends the Roll Call with these words:

“Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect (11:39, 40).”

In this life, they never fully received what was promised. Certainly, they too had glimpses of the kingdom within and among them, but they did not receive it in full. The “something better” God has planned is the inclusion through Jesus Christ of the whole company of the faithful. The author says that without us, they would not be made perfect. To be made perfect means to be made complete. Without you and me and the full number of the saints, the kingdom will not be complete.

The way to be ready for that final day is to keep our eyes on the kingdom and to live by the values of the kingdom in the give and take, the opportunities and challenges, the joys and sorrows, and the temptations and blessings of each day.

Two of our long time members came to this country as immigrants from a war torn land. Their faith had been forged and strengthened through the suffering and brutality that they and their families experienced at the hand of an occupying army. Through it all, they kept their eyes on the Kingdom and the promises of Jesus. After they became established in this country, they gave much of their time, energy and resources to help other refugees from their country get established and become acclimated to a new culture and a new way of life. They helped their new friends navigate new customs, language and government to become fellow citizens. Their confident faith in the promises of Jesus leads them to live their lives practicing hospitality, kindness and generosity. They know what it is to see flashes of the Kingdom breaking out all around them.

I want to be ready for the Kingdom. I want to be ready to walk in the new Jerusalem just like John. The way to be ready is to keep our eyes on the prize. It is to live today with the confident faith that we take risks for the gospel, making earth a little more like heaven, because we know that no matter whatever happens to us we will be with Jesus when the Kingdom comes.

Are you ready?