

Would You Rather Be a Tourist or a Pilgrim?

Sermon for Sunday, June 6, 2010
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Hebrews 11:8-16

[The idea for this message came some months ago. It seemed fitting to present it today, when we would have a number of visitors who have travelled from near and far for the Merlin High School reunion.]

Think of someone who lets their house fall into decay. The carpet has never been vacuumed. The outside trim has been left unpainted, and now the wood is cracked and rotting. The roof leaks, but the owner never attempts to fix it. The door fell off its hinges, but still lays where it landed. When you ask the owner, “Why don’t you repair your home?”, the person replies, “I’m here for only a few more days, so why bother?”

I’m obviously having some fun here, making a caricature out of an idea. But this would be one possible interpretation of a number of passages in the Bible, such as the two we’ve heard today.

2 Corinthians 5:1, Today’s English Version:
For we know that when this tent we live in—our body here on earth—is torn down, God will have a house in heaven for us to live in, a home he himself has made, which will last forever.

I said I’m only making a caricature — that is, exaggerating something to the point of being absurd. But when we look around the world and see what people are doing to the earth and to one another, we have to wonder, “What *are* they thinking?”

If you take that same attitude about not fixing up the house and apply it to society, you will then find people who throw garbage on the sidewalk, who grow crop after crop on a field but never bother to restore the soil, who cut down entire forests without planting new trees, who leave behind piles of toxic waste when they abandon their mine, who treat people as commodities to be exploited and then dumped. “It doesn’t matter,” they say. “This world is only temporary, so who cares?”

The answer is, “God cares.” Back in Genesis chapter 1 God put humans in charge of the world, responsible for looking after his creation.

A preacher by the name of Michael Horton began a sermon by describing his confusion as a child when they sang in his church “This World Is Not My Home” and “This Is My Father’s World,” sometimes back to back in

the same service. That’s an example of the tension we find as we look back and forth between these various parts of the Bible.

Dwight Moody was like the “Billy Graham of the 1800s.” He handled this dilemma with this famous saying: “We must not be so heavenly minded that we are no earthly good.” In fact, the very *opposite* is true: it is our hope of heaven which gives us courage to stand for justice and truth in this world; it’s our longing for living with the Lord which gives us strength to keep on when the going gets tough; it’s our surrender to serving Jesus which makes us faithful and responsible as family members, as employees or business owners, and as citizens in general.

For today, I want to examine deeper the Scriptures which talk about our hope of heaven.

Hebrews chapter 11 is like the “honour roll” of the Bible, listing people who were faithful to God in spite of all kinds of dangers and troubles. Here’s part of what it says about Abraham:

Hebrews 11:9-10, Today’s English Version:
By faith he lived as a foreigner in the country that God had promised him. He lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who received the same promise from God. For Abraham was waiting for the city which God has designed and built, the city with permanent foundations.

The book of Genesis in the Bible tells us that Abraham grew up in the city of Ur. Sir Leonard Woolley discovered the ancient remains of Ur in 1920, and spent the next fourteen years doing extensive excavations of the city. Here is part of what he found.

An average dwelling measured forty by fifty-two feet... The lower walls were build of burned brick, the upper of mud brick, and the whole wall was usually plastered and whitewashed. An entrance lobby led into the central courtyard, onto which all the rooms opened. On the lower floor were located the servants’ room, the kitchen, the bathroom, the guest room, and a bathroom specifically for guests. The second floor housed the family, with five rooms for them. The entire house of the average middle-class person had from ten to twenty rooms.

This was the kind of lifestyle which Abraham was accustomed to. Yet he left that behind, and lived the rest of his life in a tent, settling down in one place, only to get up and move again to another place. God had promised to give this land to Abraham’s descendants [Genesis 15:18], yet Abraham never saw the day. When

his wife Sarah died, he had to go to the people who lived in that land and say, "I am a foreigner living here among you; sell me some land, so that I can bury my wife" [Genesis 23:4].

Abraham believed God when he did not know where (Hebrews 11:8-10), when he did not know how (verses 11-12), when he did not know when (verses 13-16), and when he did not know why (verses 17-19). But still he trusted God. How are you doing when you don't know all the answers to your questions?

David Biebel wrote this about the riddles of life.

I still don't understand, nearly 10 years later. At least I don't understand why the Lord allowed my sons to be afflicted with infantile bilateral striatal necrosis. I don't understand why Jonathan died or why Christopher lived. Today he's 16 and nearly totally recovered.

All I understand is this: life is a riddle, which God wants me to experience but not necessarily solve. When I was struggling to solve it, I found 1 Corinthians 13:12, which only makes sense in the original Greek: "For now we see (or understand) through a mirror, in a riddle," the apostle Paul wrote, "but then face to face."

Modern Christians sometimes rush to put God's truth into little boxes, neatly systematized, categorized, organized, and principle-ized, when God's perspective on suffering is too big for any of that. While for some "spirituality" is defined by what you know, God may be more concerned with how you handle what you cannot know.

A riddle loses its mystery and its power, even perhaps its significance, once it is solved. By keeping us in our riddle (every person's riddle is unique) God is helping us learn to walk by faith, and not by sight.

The honour roll in Hebrews gives similar comments to the people who followed after Abraham and Sarah:

Hebrews 11:13-16, Today's English Version: It was in faith that all these persons died. They did not receive the things God had promised, but from a long way off they saw them and welcomed them, and admitted openly that they were foreigners and refugees on earth. Those who say such things make it clear that they are looking for a country of their own. They did not keep thinking about the country they had left; if they had, they would have had the chance

to return. Instead, it was a better country they longed for, the heavenly country. And so God is not ashamed for them to call him their God, because he has prepared a city for them.

They longed for their new home in heaven. This was the hope that sustained them, which gave them strength for the journey.

Someone has suggested that we can relate to this idea better by comparing tourists and pilgrims.

The tourism industry in Palma de Majorca, Spain, as part of an marketing campaign, asked student to write their definitions of "tourists." Nine-year-old Maria Canelli won honours with her definition: "A tourist is a person on vacation with nothing to do, and is busier than an astronaut and rushing faster than a rocket to get it done!"

Here's how one writers compared tourists and pilgrims:

A tourist may collect souvenirs; a pilgrim collects scars. A tourist wants to view the beautiful; the pilgrim brings beauty into this world. A pilgrim is on his way to his eternal home; the tourist is leaving his home, or rather losing his home, in aimless wanderings.

I'll add my own thoughts to that. A tourist finds pleasure in the beautiful surroundings, the comfortable accommodations, the exciting attractions. As long as the journey meets those expectations, life is good.

A pilgrim, on the other hand, has a destination uppermost in mind. Certainly the adventures we have on the way there give colour to the experience; but the pilgrim finds the greatest thrill and pleasure in knowing that there is more to the journey than what we see around us. It is this knowledge of the "something more" which enables the pilgrim to not just survive the journey, but to thrive, even in the midst of storms and derailed plans. That "something more" has a name, and his name is Jesus. Knowing that he is the goal of the journey, as well as the guide along the way, is our source of joy and strength.

Ugandan bishop Festo Kivengere describes how three men from his diocese were executed by firing squad in 1973:

February 10 began as a sad day for us in Kabale. People were commanded to come to the stadium and witness the execution. Death permeated the atmosphere. A silent crowd of about three thousand was there to watch. I had

permission from the authorities to speak to the men before they died, and two of my fellow ministers were with me.

They brought the men in a truck and unloaded them. They were handcuffed and their feet were chained. The firing squad stood at attention. As we walked into the center of the stadium, I was wondering what to say. How do you give the gospel to doomed men who are probably seething with rage?

We approached them from behind, and as they turned to look at us, what a sight! Their faces were all alight with an unmistakable glow and radiance.

Before we could say anything, one of them burst out: "Bishop, thank you for coming! I wanted to tell you. The day I was arrested, in my prison cell, I asked the Lord Jesus to come into my heart. He came in and forgave me all my sins! Heaven is now open, and there is nothing between me and my God! Please tell my wife and children that I am going to be with Jesus. Ask them to accept him into their lives as I did." The other two men told similar stories, excitedly raising their hands which rattled their handcuffs.

I felt that what I needed to do was to talk to the soldiers, not to the condemned. So I translated what the men had said into a language the soldiers understood. The military men were standing there with guns cocked and bewilderment on their faces. They were so dumbfounded that they forgot to put the hoods over the men's faces! The three faced the firing squad standing close together. They looked toward the people and began to wave, handcuffs and all. The people waved back. Then shots were fired, and the three were with Jesus.

We stood in front of them, our own hearts throbbing with joy, mingled with tears. It was a day never to be forgotten. Though dead, the men spoke loudly to all of Kigezi District and beyond, so that there was an upsurge of life in Christ, which challenges death and defeats it.

The next Sunday, I was preaching to a huge crowd in the hometown of one of the executed men. Again, the feel of death was over the congregation. But when I gave them the testimony of their man, and how he died, there

erupted a great song of praise to Jesus! Many turned to the Lord there.¹

My friends, my prayer for you is that you would know Jesus: know his love for you, know his sacrifice for you for the forgiveness of your sins, know his presence with you moment by moment; but most of all, just simply know *him*. That is the foundation for everything else in life.

Theme for today: Next to the Bible, John Bunyan's book *The Pilgrim's Progress* has been the most influential Christian book ever written. It has encouraged countless people as they seek to follow Jesus day by day. Ironically, he wrote it while in prison: locked up by the church establishment to silence his unorthodox way of preaching the Gospel.

How are you doing on your journey? His simple advice of keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus is as valid today as it was in 1675 (as well as the writing of Hebrews 12:12).

¹ Colin Chapman, in *The Case for Christianity*.