Sermon | Proper 15C

TEXT: Hebrews 11:17—12:3

14 August 2016

Seeking a Better Country

*In the Name of +Jesus. Amen.*

*Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.*

THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD.

Dear saints,

How many of you have been watching the Olympics? I for one love watching the Olympics games. And it doesn’t matter which contest, game is on—I like watching pretty much all of it. Well, if you watched the beginning of this summer’s Olympics in Rio de Janeiro—you know how this goes—they have this thing called ‘the Opening Ceremony.’ And in the Opening Ceremony, they have this liturgy called ‘the Parade of Nations,’ where every nation that is competing in the Olympics comes out, and there’s a sign with each country’s name, there’s the country’s flag, and the athletes from each country stand behind their flag and come parading out, sometimes in the traditional garb of wherever it is they’re from—it’s interesting to see the diversity in the places represented in the world.

And so I was sitting there, during the Opening Ceremony, watching this Parade of Nations play out. I was intrigued because there was this one group, called ‘Independent Olympic Athletes.’ There was no sign with a country name. There was no flag. It was almost as if these were folks without a country. And I was perplexed by this, and I thought, “Doesn’t everybody have a country? Isn’t everybody from somewhere?”

Well I did some research, and as it turns out, some of these people, these ‘Independent Olympic Athletes’ are political refugees, fleeing whatever bad situation is going on in their homeland; some of them are from countries facing political strife—it’s not really clear if their country even exists; some come from nations that have been banned from competing in the Olympics because of human rights issues, things like that. But it just amazed me that you could have athletes competing in the Olympics that had no nation, no country attached to them. It was almost as if these were people without a country.

Well, as I was preparing this sermon, I thought, that’s exactly the point that every one of these readings is making today: Every one of these readings is about God’s people of faith. **And God’s people of faith are like strangers and pilgrims in the world; they’re like folks without a country, because in faith, they’re looking forward to the better country that God is preparing for them.**

In the Old Testament, we heard about Moses, the story of the Crossing of the Red Sea. And, who was Moses? Moses was the firstborn son of a Hebrew woman. About the time Moses was born, Pharaoh had become afraid, because the Hebrews, who were slaves in Egypt at the time, were becoming populous. And Pharaoh pronounced this edict that all the firstborn sons of Hebrew slaves should be put to death. And so fearing Pharaoh’s edict, Moses’ mother puts Moses in a basket, sends him down a river, and ironically, is picked up by the daughter of Pharaoh, and is raised in Pharaoh’s palace, almost as if he is a son of the king. And so there’s Moses, the son of a Hebrew slave, being raised with all the trappings of Egyptian royalty, wealth, power, prestige, honor, glory.

And then in Exodus 3, Moses is called by God, in the burning bush. God says, “I’m going to deliver my people Israel, out of slavery and into freedom; out of Egypt, and into the Promised Land. And you’re going to do it for me.” Now Moses, we remember, had a country. It was Egypt. And he was doing pretty well for himself there. But when God calls him, he is saying, is “Look, I want you to leave that country. I want you to go to a foreign land, to a place you’ve never been before. I want you to spend forty years wandering in the wilderness, as a stranger, a pilgrim in this world—like a person without a country. And during that time, there’s going to be suffering—a whole lot of suffering. Think of all that Moses suffered, as he journeyed to the Promised Land: the attacks of Pharaoh, the grumblings of his own people, the lack of food and water. And it was as if God was using all of it, all of this suffering to teach Moses and his people, to live by faith, not in themselves, in their own strength and abilities, but in God alone for everything they needed. God was using all of their suffering to cause them to look to him as the source of life and salvation. Well to top it all off, Moses gets to the end of his life, and never set foot in the Promised Land. He never sees God’s promise fulfilled with his own eyes.

And so we think, why? Why would Moses put himself through all that? Wouldn’t it have been much better for him—wouldn’t his quality of life have been much better if he just stayed in Egypt? Why did he do it? Well the answer is faith. You see, **God calls his people of faith to live in this world as strangers and pilgrims in the world, to live as people headed to a better country that God himself is preparing for them. God’s people of faith live for the future, not the present, trusting and believing that what God has in store for us, is so much better than anything we could possibly have here in this life.**

In faith, Moses wasn’t focusing on what was behind him. Moses was focusing on what was ahead of him. He wasn’t looking behind him, to what lied in his past. He was looking ahead of him to what lied ahead of him in the future. And he had his sights set on that better country, a country where his people be free, a country where they would no longer be slaves, a country where Israel would be God’s people, and God would be their God. That’s why Moses lived as a stranger and pilgrim in this world: because, by faith, he was looking to the future, to a better country, that God himself was preparing for him.

We have our Epistle for today. The writer to the Hebrews talks about Moses and really, a whole number of God’s Old Testament people of faith there, in Hebrews 11. The writer to the Hebrews puts them before us for our example, encouragement. He talks about Moses this way:*By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward.*[V24-26]

I want us to consider how the Christian life is really just like the life of Moses. Just as Moses and the people of Israel were redeemed by God from their slavery, their bondage in Egypt, so have we been redeemed from an even greater slavery, the slavery of sin and death, through the blood of Jesus Christ. Just as Moses and the people of Israel were saved through the water, at the Crossing of the Red Sea where there enemies were destroyed, so have we been saved through the water, the water of our baptism, where our enemies, sin, death, and the devil lie destroyed. And we have been brought into new life as sons and daughters of God. Just as Moses and the people of Israel were looking forward to their reward, to the Promised Land, a better future and a better country, where they would be God’s people and God would be their God, so are we as Christians looking forward to our reward, to the Promised Land of heaven, a better future and a better country, where all the sadness that we know in this present life, all the trouble that we experience in this fallen world will be gone, and we will spend eternity enjoying the presence of God.

And there’s one more way that our lives, the Christian life is like the life of Moses. Remember how Moses lived as a stranger and a pilgrim in this world? Remember how Moses lived in the wilderness, for forty years, as a person without a country, because he had his sights set on a better country, the Promised Land? Remember how Moses suffered many afflictions along the way? And, how God was using those sufferings to teach Moses and his people of Israel to walk by faith and not by sight, to trust not in themselves, but in God for all that they needed, for life and salvation?

Well it’s the same for us too. Christians are like strangers and pilgrims in the world. Remember those ‘Independent Olympic Athletes,’ people without a country, competing in the games? That’s us, that’s God’s Christians—strangers, pilgrims, people without a country, running a race to a better country, the hope of heaven. That’s who we are: strangers and pilgrims. Remember how Jesus said, that his disciples were ‘in the world’ but not ‘of the world?’ What that means is, Christians don’t share in the world’s values, the world’s beliefs. What the world worships and values and calls important, the gods of this world—money and power and self-promotion—none of these things have any claim on God’s Christians. Because our treasure is in heaven. Our value, identity, and worth is in Christ, and not in ourselves, not in any of the things of this world. We’re like people from a different country, who don’t speak the same language, we don’t use the same currency, or even dress the same as our neighbors, people in the world.

By faith, we’re different. Faith sets us against the world. It puts us out of sync with the times. It makes us counter-cultural. And that means—just like Moses faced the opposition of Pharaoh—Christians will always face opposition from the world. We see that opposition most clearly today when Christians are bold enough to speak their faith in the public square, when Christians speak for the dignity of each human life, for the aged and unborn, for the sanctity of marriage as God instituted it; when Christians witness their faith before the world, that’s really when we see how we, as the people of faith are divided from the world. That’s what Jesus is talking about in the Gospel when he says, “*I came not to bring peace, but division*.” Jesus will come, and those who believe in him will be divided from those who do not believe in him, who do not share in the same faith, the same creed, or the same hope of heaven.

Sometimes, that division even cuts through families. Did you hear what Jesus said in the Gospel? How, “*Father* [will be divided] *against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law*.” It’s not that Jesus wants there to be division in our families. But that division is simply one of the byproducts and side-effects of Christ’s kingdom coming—that people will be divided: those who believe from those who do not believe in him; those who are for him, from those who are against him.

But the good news is this: even though we are strangers and pilgrims in the world, as people of faith, we know we are headed to a better country that God himself is preparing for us. As people of faith we trust and believe that what God has in store for us, is so much better than anything we could possibly have here in this life. We’re living for the future, not for the present. And so the Epistle puts before us Moses and all the saints of the past who were like strangers and pilgrims, runners in a race, keeping their focus on Jesus, and the hope of eternal life. Our Epistle closes with these words: “*Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted*.” That means that, whatever hostility we have to face in this life, we know that Jesus endured the hostility first, and overcame it by his death and resurrection. In view of Christ, we know that, even in the midst of our afflictions, we are more than conquerors through his who loved us. And our hope is sure in him.

*In the Name of the Father and of the +Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

You turn on the TV, you see the things going on in our culture, And you think, “This isn’t right. This isn’t me. This isn’t who I am. I’m a Christian.” And the more you grow in your faith, the more you realize how different you are from the world. You don’t share the world’s values. You don’t share the world’s beliefs.

Just walk out in nature. You believe, that when you look out at nature, everything you’re seeing has been created by the hand of an all-powerful God, that it didn’t just spontaneously evolve by accident, but was formed and fashioned by an all-wise, all-powerful Creator. Your neighbors don’t believe that.

Or when you look at human life, that human life is no accident of spontaneous evolution, but that each person has been created, has infinite value and meaning and worth because God says, “And so ethically how this plays out is that each life is to be respected and cared for, from womb to tomb, that no

Or when you look at marriage, believe

You see, it’s a hard truth, but we are not of the world. Jesus tells us in John’s Gospel that we are in the world, but we’re not of the world.

What you believe about marriage, what you believe about gender, what you believe about life, the inherent value and dignity of human life—you realize, the world doesn’t share any of this with you. Almost everything you believe, the world thinks differently. Because the world doesn’t know God or his Word. The world has no place or respect for the Church’s doctrine and teaching. And that’s when you realize, you’re a stranger, a pilgrim, an Independent Olympic Athlete without a country, running a race to a better country