

In the Light of Eternity: Home, Sweet Home
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Isaiah 65: 17-25
Revelation 21:1-5, 22-27
John 14:23-29

Have you ever been away from home, and later looked back at it with nostalgia? It's one of those things where, as a teenager you were dying to get away from home, but once you get into that new place – you kinda miss the old one. Perhaps you wished you'd never left.

But, after awhile, you establish a new home. Maybe you start a family of your own. And now you have two homes. You have the home you're in. And you have the home you left. It's like missionaries, ambassadors and other expatriates who live overseas for a time: "home" is an ambiguous term. It could mean the house where they currently live – the place where they hang their hats, so to speak. Or it could mean the country they had left behind, the place of their citizenship, where they had been born and where they would someday return.

That's the situation for you and me today. You and I hang our hats in this world. We have an address here, a life. But it's only the place of our *residence*. We have *residence* visas for Planet Earth, but our *citizenship* in Heaven. The big difference is that "home sweet home" is not the place we look back to – but the one we look forward to. Our true home is a place we've never been to – yet.

Over these next two weeks we will be reading from the last two chapters of Revelation. It will give us a new perspective on "home." It will help us consider our current life in the light of eternity. That wide-angle lens will bring focus and clarity to the way we, as citizens of a different country, live now.

All three of our readings today have talked about that new home – the one where we have our citizenship. Most people would refer to that home as "heaven" – and rightfully so, because that's one of the words the Bible uses. But these days the word "heaven" carries a lot of baggage – some of which is confusing and unhelpful. So I prefer to use the term, "New Creation." That's the term used in our readings today. There are some things we know about the New Creation – and some things we don't. We aren't given a whole lot of information – the Bible only addresses some of our questions. So what *does* the Bible say?

Well, here's a random (and incomplete) list. The New Creation will be like the first, but better. We are living in a mere shadow of the reality yet to come. In describing the New Creation, scenes from the old pop up. Familiar scenes, such that when you get there, you'll say, "I'm home." But it will also be different, better than we can imagine. As John writes about his vision of the world to come, he can hardly find enough superlatives to describe it. Streets of gold, gates of pearl – beauty and grandeur beyond description. (It's like trying to describe a smart phone to someone who's only used a land line.) We know it will be a joyful place – full of love and laughter. And feasts! Often, biblical stories describe a banquet going on with the best of foods and the finest of wines. And – there will be no more tears, we are told – no sorrow. No death. In fact, it will be such a joy-filled place that no one will even remember the sorrows and sufferings of this troubled world. In the light of eternity, our current troubles will only be a blip on the radar.

But more important than the *where* is the *who*. John's vision focuses on the overwhelming presence of God – no need for a place of worship because God is right there. No need even for the sun, for the light of God will fill it. No one will ever ask, "Where is God?" because his presence will fill every moment, every nook, every cranny. It's not the *where*, but the *who*, that really counts. Just think: Jesus will be there.

The New Creation is truly something to look forward to. You need to know that. I believe our deepest yearnings will be satisfied only in that new life. The Bible gives us just a glimpse so we that know it is real; the promise is sure; and you will not want to miss out on what God in store for you. You also need to know that this world is important. What we do in this world will have "echoes in eternity." (Marcus Aurelius)

As God's people, we reside here in this finite world, but we are citizens of another, "forever" world. That means that while we live on earth as full-time residents, we can never forget that we are citizens of God's domain. We have an address *here*, where we live and work. But it's only a temporary address. Ultimately we will move to our real home *with God* – where we will live forever. That's a long time! And it puts into perspective our lives here in this world. It changes who we are and how we live, because we aren't really citizens here. It's more like: we are sent here as missionaries or ambassadors. We come from God and we will return to God and in between, we are on mission to this world. While here, we will never quite speak the language fluently. We will never quite belong. We will never quite fit in. We were never meant to.

Living here, of course you take on certain local customs and ways of doing things. That's the case of any missionary. But the challenge for you and me is this: not to compromise our true identity. Rather, we must consciously live out the values Jesus has taught us. Values that represent our King. So, here's the question: as ambassadors of God's New Creation, how well do you represent your country?

Here's how God describes his ambassadors in Hebrews 11, the so-called the faith chapter. After describing a number of God's people who kept their faith in the midst of difficulties, the writer says this:

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth.... They were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. (Hebrews 11:13-16, NIV)

Christian history is full of people who saw themselves as ambassadors of God's country. People who knew that although they reside here, their real home is elsewhere. And their values are dictated by that "heavenly" country – God's country – values they need to live out in their temporary home. If you get too comfortable here – such that you blend in like a chameleon – you are in danger of compromising your faith, and of misrepresenting God. As Christians, we should stand out.

Now, some people have said they are afraid of becoming "so heavenly-minded that they are no earthly good." We certainly want to avoid that. But the other side of the coin is a greater danger

for you and me. C. S. Lewis said, "It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this one." God has made us his ambassadors to this world, missionaries for Christ. How effective can we be, if we forget our real home? If we forget our mission and the One who has sent us?

We said a moment ago that the New Creation is more about *who* than *where*. In the same way, the Church is more about *who* than *where*. *This* is just a building. *We* are the Church, the body of Christ. So we cannot just *go* to church. We have to *be* the Church. This is more than a 1-hour-per-week assignment. It's 24/7. We begin by simply living out the love of Christ. (Yesterday's Walk for Water: great example.) We are to do good in this world. We are to treat others as Jesus did, with compassion and respect. We also need to identify ourselves as Christians and speak Jesus' name. At first, the message is simple: God is good. Christians are normal. But be ready, as the Bible says, to give an account of your faith to anyone who asks.

These days, as you know, there is increasing doubt and even hostility directed at the Church. (You've seen it in the news; you hear murmurings around you.) It may not surprise you to hear that 20 years ago, 85% of Americans viewed the Church in a positive light. But you may be astounded to learn that today, that number has plummeted to 49% – less than half of our population! It's a troubling trend. I believe it will get worse before it gets better. As Christians, we need to be prepared for negativity – and to respond, not on the defensive, but by making a positive impact for Christ, and by taking a stand for him.

We need to keep that wider perspective. The here-and-now is not our true home. But we do have a job here. Jesus says our purpose is to be a little taste of the world to come. Our Lord taught that we are to be salt and light in this world. Salt is a preservative. Light guides your way. So, how brightly does your light shine for Jesus? How salty are you – preserving God's ways in this wayward world? Or put it another way: if you are meant to be salt, how thirsty do you make others for Jesus?

Live in the light of eternity! Our purpose here in this life is not to get comfortable, seeking convenience. Instead, our purpose is to provide a taste for the New Creation, to create a thirst for Christ. This world is not all we want it to be. Too often, justice is not blind; the blanket of love and mercy is pretty thin. Our deepest longings will not be completely satisfied in this broken world. Instead, those yearnings are markers that a better world does exist. They point to God's New Creation.

Time is short in this life. How long will you live? 80, maybe 90 years, give or take? Compare that to *forever*. There is no comparison. Every day we need to be reminded that we belong to a New Creation, to a life that will never end. The Apostle Peter adds a note of urgency:

"Everything in the world is about to be wrapped up, so take nothing for granted. Stay wide-awake in prayer. Most of all, love each other as if your life depended on it. Love makes up for practically anything. Be quick to give a meal to the hungry, a bed to the homeless—cheerfully. Be generous with the different things God gave you, passing them around so all get in on it: if words, let it be God's words; if help, let it be God's hearty help. That way, God's bright presence will be evident in everything through Jesus, and

he'll get all the credit as the One mighty in everything—encores to the end of time. Oh, yes!" (1 Peter 4: 7-11, *The Message*)

My friends, I don't know if that speaks to you. It speaks to me, because while I know what I should do, I confess that I have not been that person: quick to give a meal or a bed to someone who needs it. It reminds me that to do what Jesus asks will cost me something. It also reminds me that what Jesus did cost him a lot.

Let me close with a story about a mission trip – a story I recently picked up from the "Portals of Prayer" devotional booklet (copies in the back). In this story, a woman named Frances felt compelled to go to Germany to persuade her relatives to emigrate to the States, as she had done. The year was 1939 and Frances belonged to a Jewish family. All her letters, her warnings of imminent danger as she begged them to flee to safety, had fallen on deaf ears.

So Frances decided the only way to save her family was for her to persuade them in person. And so she went to Germany, even though the stamp on her passport identified her as a Jew. She was never heard from again. Years later, her American family found her name on a list of those who had died in Auschwitz. Her mission had failed.

About 2000 years ago Jesus went on a similar mission. He knew the danger of coming into this world; he knew the sacrifice that would be required of him to accomplish his mission. And he paid the price. But unlike Frances, Jesus' mission was successful. On the cross he saved us from an eternal death camp. And then he rose again, offering to all who will receive it, the gift of forever-with-him. And he gave you and me the good news to share to this world.

As Christians, you and I have two places to call home. But this world is not our true home. Someday the old creation will disappear and a New Creation – a new heaven and a new earth – will take its place. In the meantime, God has made us missionaries and ambassadors to this world. In the light of eternity, we can't afford to lose that perspective. (Prayer)