



Desiring a better country... Hebrews 11: (1-15) 16

Sermon by The Rev. Canon Phil Ashey, CEO, American Anglican Council

Please open you Bibles and join me in reading Hebrews 11:16:
“But as it is, they desired a better country...”

Do those words jump out at you like they did to me??!!

Especially in this election season where civil discourse over issues has given way to name calling, where unrest and despair have led to violence on all sides, and where we can't seem to get factual and honest answers to the questions that we are asking? I'm deeply distressed at the direction our culture and our country are heading. ***How about you—have you had enough? Are you longing for a better country yet??***

My mission at the American Anglican Council has taken me in the last 12 months multiple times to the UK and the CofE, to Wales, to Kenya, and to Uganda, and countless days and weeks in churches and communities all over North America. I've had a chance to observe what happens when western culture invades the church and begins to shape the church—rather than the church shaping the culture. So let me cut to the chase—let me share with you what I believe are two of the root problems that are leading our culture to the brink of disintegration and eventual destruction, like so many other civilizations...

The first problem is that we are shaped by a philosophical world view that people have called **“Solipsism”**: the view or theory that the self is all that can be known to exist. You simply can't know any “truth” beyond yourself, and whatever YOU define as truth! This is exactly the point Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy made years ago in expanding abortion in *Casey v Planned Parenthood*, when he justified the Court's decision on the basis of personal rights and personal freedoms: "At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and the mystery of human life." In other words, each person gets to define what is right, and wrong without any point of objective reference—like the Bible, or even just the 10 Commandments. This rejection of any point of objective reference beyond peoples' desires and feelings drives the outcome over and over striking down traditional morality as irrational and oppressive.

The second problem follows from the first. Having long since left Jerusalem with its assumptions of objective truth, right and wrong, we find ourselves in a society driven by **TERMINAL NARCISSISM**—*the obsessive and erotic preoccupation with and love of our SELF and its desires, even if they kill us*. Now when society says your fundamental point of reference is yourself, and your fundamental right is to pursue your own desires, you're in a bad place. These two things never end well, as Paul observes of those who have exchanged “the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man” in Romans 1:18-32. Having exchanged the truth about God for a lie, Paul describes how God steps back and allows people like us to end up with depraved minds, which spiral downwards into desires of the flesh we can't control, inventing all kinds of evil, violence and depravity. I invite you to read Romans 1:18-32 for yourselves—it's a catalogue of what's going on in Western culture, and in many places even invading the church.

CHURCH: *What are we supposed to do in the face of a culture that has surrendered to philosophical and moral relativism—where there are no absolute truths beyond the self and its desires?* When there is lawlessness, corruption, violence, sexual immorality and oppression by those who have the power to enforce their own desires?

Please Read with me those verses in Hebrews 10 that lead right up to the lesson we heard today, Hebrews 10:32-39... “But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, ³³ sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. ³⁴ For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. ³⁵ Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. ³⁶ For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. ³⁷ For, “Yet a little while,

and the coming one will come and will not delay;
³⁸ but my righteous one shall live by faith,
and if he shrinks back,
my soul has no pleasure in him.”

³⁹ *But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.”*

In Chapter 11 which we read this morning, the author of Hebrews gives three reasons why we have confidence to do God's will under tremendous opposition—and why we cannot shrink back:

1. ***WE HAVE CONFIDENCE because we have, by faith in Christ, already received a Better Country, a heavenly city which is our true home***
2. ***WE HAVE CONFIDENCE because God will allow that heavenly city to touch our earthly cities from time to time to give people a taste of HEAVEN!***
3. ***WE HAVE CONFIDENCE because until that heavenly city comes down for the final time we have a faith that can and will impact the culture around us and lead others to Christ... unpack each of those...***

WE HAVE CONFIDENCE because we have already received a Better Country, a heavenly city which is our true home. Listen to what Hebrews 11:9-10 says of the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob:

“By faith [Abraham] went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.

You see these Hebrew Patriarchs didn't build cities in the land they inherited from God. ***They lived as aliens and sojourners in the real estate God gave them*** because they knew God had a gift so much better in mind for them—a city with foundations, whose designer and builder is God himself! Hebrews goes on to put it this way in verses 14-15:

For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶**But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.**

Abraham had a confidence that made him confess “I really belong to another place—I am an alien and a stranger here. God the father has promised me a true home, a better country, **a heavenly one. One day I will have it—but until then I will welcome it from afar.**” That's the FAITH CONVICTON that was passed on from Patriarch to Patriarch, from father to son.

You see the Gospel isn't a land deal! It's a conviction that you and I belong to another place—a place Jesus himself calls “my Father's house where there are many rooms!” (John 14). Like Abraham, our homeland is not here on this terra firma; our citizenship is not in this country. **Our home is in heaven. We have a better country- it's called the Kingdom of God, where what God wants done**

IS done! You can read about in Revelation 21:3-4, where it describes what it will be like one day when the heavenly Jerusalem finally comes down, when in the city of God, HE himself will dwell with us, “He will wipe away every tear from our eyes, There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” *What a wonderful city that will be! What a wonderful day that will be!!*

But I want you to notice what it says here in 11:13—all of the Old Testament heroes in this “hall of faith” never received the city God promised. When they died, they only saw that better country they longed for from afar. ***NOT SO WITH YOU AND ME!!*** Turn with me to Ch. 12 and let’s read vv. 22-24:

“But ***you have come*** to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, ²³and to the assembly^[a] of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.”

You and I **HAVE come** to that heavenly home. We have ACCESS to that Better Country, that heavenly city the Old Testament saints like Abraham only welcomed from afar. We have it through the PERFECT shed blood of Jesus Christ! And as Hebrews 11:40 sums it up, God’s perfect plan was to join those waiting OT saints to US, the Church-- that they should join us in receiving our heavenly home.

AND YET: we know that the heavenly Jerusalem has not yet fully arrived! We live in desperate times, and sometimes the times get the better of us. It reminds me of one of my favorite artists, Laura Story, who remind us that

*When friends betray us
when darkness seems to win
we know that pain reminds this heart
that this is not, this is NOT our home (from “Mercies in Disguise”)*

IN FAITH, we look at evil, suffering, violence and degradation. We remember that this earth is NOT our home. But we don’t stop there. We respond by looking back at God’s promise of a better country, a heavenly city whose foundations God himself has laid...and until the final fulfillment of His promise, ***we remember that there IS a connection between that heavenly city and the earthly cities that we live in now***— in fact,

WE HAVE CONFIDENCE because God will allow his heavenly city to touch our earthly cities from time to time to give people a taste of HEAVEN!

God uses his faithful and obedient ones to bring blessing where there is a curse. He used Abraham to rescue his pagan neighbors from invading armies (Gen. 14:18ff) and Joseph's wisdom to provide food in famine wracked Egypt. **When God's people humbled themselves and prayed and sought his face, He healed their land**— in the Kingdom of Judah, and the city of Jerusalem in the reign of great King Josiah! **You can see the heavenly Jerusalem touching earthly Jerusalem on Pentecost day,** and in the days that followed, when God poured out his Holy Spirit; revival broke out! The church came together, people were healed, miracles broke out, including such sacrificial generosity that people shared their STUFF so that no one had a need! And the CHURCH enjoyed the favor of ALL the people!

At the turn of the 20th century, some Christians in Wales prayed faithfully for a new Pentecost and revival: The result was the Welsh revival. When I looked for the results of that revival on line, I found that, conservatively, 150,000 people in Wales surrendered their lives to Christ. The crime rates went down so much that Police were reported to have simply supervised the crowds going to and from Church. Judges had empty dockets in their courts! Husbands stopped spending their family's wages in the pubs and both family income and quality of life improved dramatically as fathers came home. Manufacturers reported that the workers turned out better goods. Trade union disputes were settled. Longstanding conflicts between churches and communities were healed. It was so dramatic that even the Prime minister of England, Lloyd George, took note publicly of what was going on, and how good government was on the rise. And this went on for years! I wish I could say that it is still going on...But in my travels to Wales I can tell you that they need another one.

There are revivals that have broken out in cities all over the world (not enough time to share about them): But they are temporary and fleeting, as if God is giving us just enough of a glimpse of what it could be like so that people can turn to Christ and receive a new heavenly home that will last forever, instead of an earthly one that will inevitably perish.

Some day that heavenly city, our true home, will come down and displace the cities of the world for all time—It will come from outside, from heaven, like that small stone in Daniel 2 that is not cut by human hands but by God himself. It

comes to all of the secular kingdoms built on earth by human hands, one upon the other, in sequence like a giant statue. But this little stone from heaven lands at its feet, smashing and blowing away all humanly cut kingdoms until that little stone grows to fill the whole earth!

One day the City of God will displace and replace every secular City and Kingdom on earth, and Jesus will reign. But until that happens...

WE HAVE CONFIDENCE because we have a faith that can and will impact the culture around us and lead others to Christ

- ***We have a faith that NEVER GIVES IN TO DESPAIR or Violence because we have tasted heaven and we are on the way to it:*** We have a confidence and a hope that is contagious because we know there is so much more to this life than ourselves and our own petty desires! We have a God whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine—RIGHT NOW!
- ***We have a faith that has EYES TO SEE AND DISCERN WHAT IS LASTING, AND WHAT IS NOT:*** Eyes of faith like the Patriarch and heroes of Hebrews 11 had; eyes that do not merely anticipate heaven, but eyes that see the emptiness and perishability of so much of what passes as “life on earth,”; Eyes of faith that see that far off country and say to those around us—“come higher friend, come and see the kind of life you can have by faith in Christ!”
- ***We have a faith that has a word of hope and encouragement:*** That this earth is NOT our final home. It is simply a shadow of that better country that lies ahead, a mere dress rehearsal for the real thing. We have a confession to make; that we are strangers and foreigners passing through, and that on our way God has called us share the vision of what life COULD BE on the way, a life of following Jesus on earth that promises rich relationships like none you’ve had before, purpose, significance and sacrificial generosity that enriches the lives of others
- ***And YES: We have a faith that comes with a VISION:*** An objective reference point beyond ourselves, that heavenly city whose architect is God himself. And because we have that Vision, we can call people in our secular cities to lift the horizon of their hopes and build better secular cities that are based on the values and foundations that God himself has laid in His

promises in His word, the Bible! A vision that calls us to a common good that will deliver us from death by terminal narcissism!

What could we do with the promise of that heavenly home that God has given you and me, his Church today? Illustration: Pray4StoneMountain-Lilburn... Lilburn United prayer gathering led by the Anglo pastor of the Baptist Church and the African-American pastor of the Pentecostal Church, and almost every other pastor and congregation in town; 200-300 of all races and ages gathered together on the Lilburn City park... Focus on healing wounds and reconciliation between Anglo and African-American in our own communities...Pastor Kevin's exhortation—don't just pray for a taste of heaven—**BE THAT TASTE, DEMONSTRATE IT BY COMING TOGETHER...and we did!** All races and ages came together in prayer huddles all over the park, to embrace, pray for each other, and begin some healing conversations. *It was a taste of that heavenly city, the Kingdom of God, where what God wants done IS done!*

THROUGH CHRIST AND HIS BLOOD SHED FOR OUR SINS, WE HAVE BEEN GIVEN A HEAVENLY HOME, A BETTER COUNTRY... You know, whoever wins this presidential election has a terrible mess to clean up. So the real question is NOT “what will they do?”

The real question is this: “CHURCH: WHAT WILL WE DO TO BRING the vision, the promises and the resources of our heavenly home to bear on the world around us—How will WE open doors for God's Kingdom, God's city, to invade our cities—so that what God wants done IS done??”