

The City of God

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Scripture: Hebrews 11:1-3; 8-16

Recently I read this fanciful (very) account of a sports reporter interviewing a greyhound, a former prize money racer...

“I knew a racing dog once, down Florida way, a greyhound. He lined up on that track with all the other greyhounds. The gun went off, you know the drill. Dogs raced around the oval. Chasing a mechanical rabbit to the finish.

Then one day, out of the blue, this one greyhound retired. I didn’t know him that well, but as luck would have it I got invited to his retirement party. Talked to him afterward, being a journalist and all...

“Do you miss the glitter and excitement of race day, the track life?”

“No,” he said, “not much.”

“Well, what was the matter? Did you get too old to race?”

“No, I still had some race in me.”

“Did you get too slow, didn’t want to embarrass yourself?”

“No, I won millions for my owner. I could still run.”

“So what happened? Did you go lame? Injury, maybe?”

“Oh, no, my legs are holding up pretty good.”

“Then what was it?” I pressed on.

“I quit.”

“You quit?”

“I just quit.”

“Why did you just quit?”

“I just quit the day I discovered what I had been chasing was not a real rabbit.” That dog looked me in the eye. “All that running and running, training and chasing—and what I was chasing, it wasn’t even real.”

It isn’t only retired greyhounds who get that

suspicion, especially on the downhill half of their careers, that what they’ve been chasing after so hard somehow isn’t even real. Exciting, profitable, maybe interesting, even fulfilling for a time...but I have the suspicion that more and more of the children of the Modern Age come back to this question of meaning: “What makes the race worthwhile?” How is all our restlessness, our chasing after the prize, made worthwhile in the end—and when is it merely wasted motion and wasted life and breath?

These questions of meaning are not new; apparently they impelled the writer of our text from Hebrews. “What makes the race worthwhile?” The author felt this letter was necessary in order to address this question to those hearers. “Faith gives substance to our hopes and convinces us of realities we do not see.” We hear over and over this refrain, “By faith...the people of old won God’s approval”: (Abel, Cain, Noah, Enoch in the first few verses, many more follow.) “By faith Abraham [and Sarah] set out to a place he was to receive as an inheritance, not knowing where he was going...By faith he stayed in the land he had been promised, but as in a foreign land, as a wandering nomad, in tents: but by faith he looked forward to the city whose Architect and Builder is God—the Better City which made all his obedient wandering worthwhile.” [vv 8-10, roughly translated]

To encourage his hearers, disciples of the risen Christ living in time of persecution and martyrdom, the author held up before them these faithful heroines and heroes who wandered in this lifetime as sojourners upon the earth who put up with every kind of hardship. “They all died, and never received the promises...never actually moved into God’s Greater City beyond the horizon...but they greatly anticipate a heavenly city; a heavenly and permanent Jerusalem established by God which beckons them forward, which makes worthwhile their mileage and their motion here on earth... “Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed He has prepared a City for them.” [v 16]

It is also as disciples of our Lord Jesus that you and I hear this encouragement; exactly two weeks after we celebrated the empty tomb and His Resurrection and His triumph over the grim finality of death. In this confidence that the risen Christ has overcome the power and finality of death by being raised again from the grave in space and time and within human history, we can now afford to be truthful about these things. Truthful about death, and our own mortality, and about chasing what is real and what difference it all makes.

Truthful about the fact that each one of us will one day surely die.

(I don't think I'm talking this way just because I'm getting older—there was a time I thought those people wandering around on the college campus at Homecoming for their 10th or 20th Reunion were old. Now we think “old” is when you get out of breath playing bingo. George Burns remarked, “Old is when you stoop down to tie your shoelaces and while you're down there you look around to see if there's anything else you can do.”)

We live increasingly in a society which is not comfortable talking about death. Disciples of Jesus have no reason to fear—but it is true that death causes us to confront the fact that in the end our lives depend upon forces over which we have no control. We pay our insurance premiums and visit our physician and try to walk a few miles each day—but in the end we are vulnerable; we cannot guarantee ourselves even one more day. So for many, choosing not to get real about death is another way of choosing not to get real with God. Avoiding the subject of death appears to allow folks to avoid the subject of God as Lord over life and death. (Apart from faith in the crucified and risen Lord, who has shown us the love and power of God, I can understand how death would be frightening to some people!)

And so we have people die in the hospital or in the Senior Residence—anywhere but in our own homes. Many now talk about people “passing on” or “passing”—but using the “D-word” might remind us of our own mortality, our own dependence, our own utter helplessness over our own lives in the end. (It is said that Philip of Macedon, one of the most effective military generals in antiquity and the

father of Alexander the Great, employed a slave to accompany him everywhere, simply to whisper in his ear every hour, on the hour, “Philip, thou shalt surely die.” No denial for Philip of Macedon!)

But not everyone is an effective military general: I suspect a strong motive for the political groundswell for bigger Government in the West corresponds directly to a general loss of trust in God; it comes from the desire to try to procure a perceived security or invulnerability at any cost. How much personal energy and expense we invest trying to stay and look younger, trying to keep fit and safe and “in control” of every facet of our lives. Some of this hope is legitimate—who wants to take needless chances, or die any earlier than we have to—but in another sense it feeds the fear that if only we had better police forces, a better Defense Department, a better “international community,” a better health care system and more doctors and drugs and government agencies with bigger budgets, we would finally be able to rest a little easier, a little more securely for a little while longer. (In my mind it's a dead giveaway we are trying a little too hard to keep everyone free from harm when school districts start considering that they outlaw kids from playing “tag” on the grass because someone might get hurt.) But our outsized fears are all a bit like the wealthy farmer who amassed barns and barns full of grain only to be told, “You fool, did you not know you will die this very night?”

How prescient was the American poet Edna St Vincent Millay, who died in 1950. Even before then she anticipated and described the condition of underlying fear and aimlessness which portrays a lot of our popular culture today. (Chuck Hoover shared this poem of hers with me):

Man has never been the same since
God died.

He has taken it very hard.

Why you'd think it was only
yesterday, the way he takes it.

Not that he says so much, but he
laughs

Much louder than he used to.

And he can't bear to be left alone
even for a minute

And he can't

Sit still.
 He gets along pretty well as long as
 it's daylight,
 He works very hard,
 And he amuses himself very hard
 with the many cunning amusements
 This clever age affords.
 But all no use: the moment it begins
 to get dark,
 As soon as it is night
 He goes out and howls over the
 grave of God.

This unspoken fear driving people to hyperactivity, to perpetual busyness and amusement, provides a sad contrast to those disciples of Jesus in every age who see death for what it is: a liberation; a following Him into the place He has already gone before and prepared for us. We hear the names of these commended in Hebrews who joyfully and willingly went to their certain death out of love for God and trust in His future for them. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian and martyr who died in prison just before the end of World War II, greeted the two guards come to lead him to his execution with a face radiant in joyful expectation. "For you it is an end; for me a beginning." Upon his deathbed William Blake told his wife Catherine that he was but moving from one room to another, and he began particularly beautiful songs which he told her came to him directly from heaven. (One modern nonagenarian was asked how he managed to reach ninety: "Just bad luck, I guess.")

We moderns know all about being nomads and travelers—but children of our age know far too little about the Heavenly City which brings meaning to all our earthly wanderings. Many Americans can afford to travel back and forth to Europe or Asia or Africa, and do so with confidence. We are a people "on the move"—but no longer moving toward the will of God, toward the Greater City—we moderns are simply apt to be restless (though I just read that relocation is at a 40-year low, due to the economic climate—only 35 million Americans relocated last year.) How many of us still live in the city or town in which we grew up, which nurtured us? How many of us think we might have a debt to pay or an obligation to that town or to that network of friends which

helped to raise us? Of course we probably think this is a pointless question, because we Californians are almost all children or grandchildren of those who have chosen to move here from somewhere else. (I am a thoroughly modern man in this respect: I've moved and lived all over the place. I never thought of my wandering far from where I grew up as "howling over the grave of God" but I have to admit a lot of it came from simple restlessness; more recently I believe some of it has been obedience.) It never occurs to us to much look backward in gratitude; we Americans are a people moving ahead to explore, to check what's just around the next bend.

Unlike Abraham and Sarah, whose travels as they obeyed the call of God formed in them, I believe, an inner sense of confidence and fulfillment and depth, modern Americans alienated from God move around a lot and it only makes people more jumpy, more restless, more empty. Philosopher Philippe Beneton puts it this way: "We are all different, says modern man, and the differences make no difference." We are all different, so about 30 million of us are children of people who uprooted and came West from somewhere else—probably, somewhere else where it snowed. We are all different: some choose Audi and some choose Mercedes or Lexus or BMW, if they can afford them. If not, some choose hamburgers and some choose cheeseburgers out of those billions and billions served. Some choose piercings and some choose tattoos and some choose Friday casual and some choose casual period and some choose flipflops and some still choose L.L. Bean. At the hour of our death these days, some choose to be buried in caskets painted in the colors of their alma mater, in honor of their football heroes, or buried under personalized headstones featuring butterflies or golf clubs or poodles. Some wish for their ashes to be strewn out in the Pacific, or in the mountains, or out of a hot air balloon—or kept in an urn on the mantelpiece of a favorite daughter.

"We are all different, and the difference makes no difference."

How different are moderns from the "pilgrims" of a different age who never left home. Imagine a German peasant couple in the Middle Ages who never in their lives walked more than five miles from their village, or a family in an Elizabethan

London borough. They had no capability or desire to visit faraway lands; but as they heard the church bell toll for the noonday prayers each day it might have reminded them of the earthly end that awaits each of us. (Or, as John Donne wrote of the bells of St Paul's Cathedral tolling after yet one more Funeral Service: "Ask not for whom the bell tolls... it tolls for thee.") Those bells reminded believers that they really are destined to go somewhere in the end; those bells reminded believers to cling lightly to possessions and personal plans on earth and instead to build up treasure in heaven; those bells reminded them there is a New Jerusalem awaiting them and each one of us which makes London look like the shabbiest of sticks and straw. No earthly effort is too great, no commitment too costly to expend for such a certain and glorious Hope.

You disciples worshiping God this morning recognize, also, the adventure which awaits those who trust in Jesus and follow His Spirit—as geographical sojourners such as Abraham and Sarah, or spiritual pilgrims such as those who may live out their whole lives in the same village. One life of a kind of "excitement" awaits the restless young man whose goal is to be with as many women as he can get—but his will be a very different quality of life from the young man and woman who choose in sacred covenant before "God and these witnesses" to promise their lives to each other, forsaking all others, until death do them part. One is a modern sort of "excitement"; one is a life of holy adventure of an entirely different order. (May God help any nation which chooses not to remember the distinction.)

Some have argued that disciples of Jesus who strive toward a heavenly future make suspect citizens here on earth. (Perhaps you've heard the quip "some Christians are so heavenly minded they're no earthly good.")

C.S. Lewis observed, "If you read history you will find that the Christians who did the most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The apostles themselves who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade—all left their mark on earth precisely because their minds

were occupied with Heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this one. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth 'thrown in'; aim at earth and you will get neither."

It stands to reason: we should be the ones most patient and persevering; we should be the ones who stick to what is right and just and good because it pleases our God—whether we seem to be making headway, day to day or even year to year, or not. It is not easy or instant work to raise babies and then children to become responsible and faithful adults, or to support impoverished orphans in Baja, or to teach anyone who is a child of this age how to become mature in the Kingdom of God. It is not easy to decide to keep your integrity each day as you go back into an office corrupt with gossip and crooked politics; it is not easy to keep up your hopes and your health when you live alone and tend to get "the blues." It is not easy to continue to be hopeful as you pray for healing for loved ones whose health is deteriorating. But the City whose builder and architect is God awaits your faithfulness, awaits your perseverance. Your faithful efforts are never in vain.

You and I, disciples of our risen Lord and pilgrims together on His Way, are in fact the ones who may be most honest about the reality of death in this world and therefore most ardent in our love for this life. Who are we kidding: fifty years from now most of us are not going to be around, no matter how many ounces of water we drink or how much Government we are willing to fund.

But chasing after what is real; following the One raised from the dead is what allows us to live most fully aware of the beauty and the adventure of life in this world. We feel the surge of affection so strongly when a loved one is about to get on the plane and leave us; we pray with such fervor when someone's fate seems to be weighing in the balance in the ICU.

I vividly remember one late afternoon run I took around the neighborhood in my home town, Palo Alto, in September of 1979. It was the same route, running by the same tract houses, I had run past for years—but that one particular run took place the day before I was to move with all my belongings,

as an adult, to Connecticut. I was so apprehensive, about to fly to the east coast into a very uncertain future far from home and loved ones. The flowers in those front yards never seemed more bright or the breeze more sweet than in that afternoon when I knew I might be moving away from them—probably forever.

I was running away from some things when I moved to Connecticut. The Holy Spirit keeps calling us now to live toward the Heavenly City whose builder is God, in view of which our lives in this world may become full.

We pilgrims on the Christian Way are not determined by our mileage or our motion: to be running away from our past or our fears or our restlessness is not the same. To be busy as the socks in the spin cycle is not the same as those who longed for and gladly spent their lives on the way toward the Heavenly City; all this movement may be merely our modern “howling over the grave of God.”

If Anyone ever knew how to handle the grave it was our Lord Jesus. He knew how to live toward the New Jerusalem—and why...“For the sake of the joy that was before Him He endured even the cross...” [Hebrews 12:2] Nothing brings more joy, more fulfillment, than our following Him in His eternal Way—whether during our threescore and ten years on this earthly landscape we encounter crosses or crowns.

“If you want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Me...For those who lose their life for My sake will surely save it.”

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible. By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's. Through this he received approval as righteous, God himself giving approval to his gifts; he died, but through his faith he still speaks...

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God...

All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.