

"STRANGERS AND ALIENS"

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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. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, 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

I've never really understood most of the Letter to the Hebrews. It's filled with references to Jewish liturgical sacrifice and other rather foreign concepts.

But while the first 9 or 10 chapters seem to speak to a different age, the last three chapters have always surprised me with their relevance.

These saints, these "heroes of the faith", are described as "strangers and aliens."

To dwell in a foreign land in ancient times was very difficult. The foreigner was regarded with hatred and suspicion and contempt. Always an outsider.

William Barclay, in his commentary on Hebrews, quotes from an ancient document called the Letter of Aristeas to illustrate this:

"It is a fine thing to live and die in one's native land.

A foreign land brings contempt to poor men and shame to rich men, for there is the lurking suspicion that they have been exiled for evil they have done."

And in the apocryphal book Ecclesiasticus there is the passage:

"Better the life of the poor under a shelter of logs than sumptuous fare in the house of strangers. With little or much be contented: so wilt thou not have to bear the reproach of thy wandering.

Foreign students here at the university feel like strangers and aliens. Melinda and I often hear that they seek friendship among their American classmates, and find us Americans rather distant. We are unwilling or unable to form close friendships of the sort that the foreign students expect. They say that we Americans seem friendly, and the foreign student may think that he's made a friend,

only to be ignored or forgotten.

Most of the professors at the Korean university where I spent my sabbatical last spring and summer had studied and held teaching positions here in the U.S. They returned to Korea because they felt strangers here. In Korea, friendships are lasting... when you make a friend, it's for life. People are bonded for life simply by graduating from the same high school or college. Here, on the other hand, friendships seem disposable.

The author of the Book of Hebrews certainly understood what it meant to be a foreigner. Two of the great traumatic events of the Hebrew people were the bondage in Egypt and the exile in Babylon, when in both cases they lived as foreigners.

The label of "wanderer" was first attached to Cain.

In Genesis 4 we read that, after Cain had killed his brother Abel,
The Lord said,
'What have you done?
Listen!
Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground.
Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand.
When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you.
You will be a *restless wanderer* on the earth.'

Cain said to the Lord,
'My punishment is more than I can bear.
Today you are driving me from the land,
and I will be hidden from your presence.
I will be a restless wanderer on the earth,
and whoever finds me will kill me.'

But the Lord said to him,
'Not so.
If anyone kills Cain,
he will suffer vengeance seven times over.'
Then the Lord put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him.

So Cain went out from the Lord's presence and lived in the land of Nod (*which means Wandering*) east of Eden.
(Genesis 4:10-16)

The life of ceaseless wandering was unbearable for Cain. He sought security, which was quite natural.

Cain was then building a city, and he named it after his son Enoch.
(verse 17)

The city of that time was characterized by walls, a walled fortress, providing security.

So there is a strand of thought in the Bible that says,

to be a foreigner, an alien, a stranger, a wanderer,
is a curse.

But there is *another* strand of thought in the Bible
which *values* the wandering life, the life of the nomad.

This also begins with the story of Cain and Abel.
Recall that Cain was a farmer, and Abel a shepherd... and therefore a wanderer.

And the animosity between them came to the surface
when Abel's sacrifice of a sheep was preferred by God
above Cain's sacrifice of grain.

And of course,
Abraham, the ancestor of the Hebrews is called "the father of all who believe" because he obeyed God's command, which was:

"Go from your country
and your kindred
and your father's house
to the land that I will show you."
(Genesis 12:1)

Go from your country! your home!
He had to leave Ur of the Chaldeans
for the uncertain life of the nomad,
for a country in which
he was soon to know famine.
God leaves him no illusions:

"Know for certain
that your descendants will be
strangers
in a country not their own,
and they will be enslaved
and mistreated four hundred
years."

(Genesis 15:13)

Ur, Abraham's home,
was a highly civilized place.
A secure place.
And here we have Abraham obeying,
leaving his place,
going out into the unknown,
in perfect submission and confidence
towards God alone,
breaking every natural bond,
and disregarding every prudent
consideration
that may have held him back.

Another evidence
that the life of wandering was valued
was the Feast of Booths, or Tabernacles,
which was an annual event in Israel.
During this feast,
each family was to build a hut of twigs and
vines
in which to live seven days
to commemorate the wandering of the
Hebrews
when God brought them out of Egypt.

God Himself was,
to the Hebrews of the Exodus,
a wandering God
who led his people,
not like the other gods
who were very localized.

The land of Canaan, on the other hand,
was filled with settled people, farmers,
and settled gods.
Eventually the Hebrew people settled there
also,
built cities and farms.
They wanted God to settle down too.
The Ark of the Covenant,
being portable,
no longer seemed respectable
for God's dwelling place.
As David said to Nathan,
"Here am I,
living in a palace of cedar,

while the ark of God remains in
a tent."

(2 Samuel 7:2)

He's saying perhaps
that he feels guilty
to be living in such a magnificent house,
while God lives in a "mobile home,"
this Ark of the Covenant.
Or perhaps David felt no guilt
at living luxuriously himself,
but was embarrassed to have a God
living in a mobile home...
it's not respectable, somehow.
All these foreign dignitaries will be
visiting....

Nathan discouraged David from building
the temple,
but David's son Solomon eventually built
it.
God was finally thought to be
"domesticated"...
the Jew was to worship only in God's
temple
in Jerusalem.

Many of the prophets saw
that Israel had lost something valuable
when they became a settled people
and the prophets looked back upon these
earlier times
with nostalgia.
They understood that God doesn't live in a
house.

Life as a pilgrim or foreigner may seem
exciting and glamorous at times.
First Mennonite Church is often referred to
as
a transient congregation,
made up of people who stay here a few
years,
studying or working at the university in
many cases,
and then pack up and leave for a new job,
new home,

new friends, new congregation.
A lot of us are young, not yet tied down,
and not yet ready to be tied down.

And many of us have welcomed the chance
to travel abroad
to experience new, and perhaps exotic,
places and cultures.
The SST program at Goshen College is a key
part
of the education that they provide.

So in a sense,
First Mennonite is largely populated by
people who have experienced being
strangers and aliens.
But the writer of Hebrews says that
these strangers and aliens among us
are not only those who literally travel
abroad.
It includes those who may have always
lived
within a few miles of their birthplace,
but who, in the words of scripture,
"long for a better country",
those who are aware
of how temporary their existence here is .
It includes not only the young,
but the young at heart.

In Hebrews 11:13 we read that
these men and women of faith
"admitted that they were aliens and
strangers on earth."
It struck me that what it doesn't say is
that they **chose** to be aliens and strangers.
They were simply faithful,
led by God.
It may have been with reluctance
that they admitted to being
strangers on earth.

Likewise, we should all admit that
we also are strangers and aliens on earth,
that we cannot stay here,
that our time is short,
that we don't have any claim

to possessions or a home.

If we took seriously
this pilgrim view of life,
we would place less value
on material security.
That would mean a radical change
in our thinking,
because, like most people outside the
church,
we worship security...
we make it a god,
and sacrifice upon its altar many values--
freedom, any chance of adventure,
even relationships to other people
are sacrificed to security.

Our concern for security
blinds us to the needs of others,
to God's concerns...
to the business of His Kingdom.

We should place less value on material
security,
because of the obvious fact that,
in reality, it is not permanent.

The younger Christians among us often
realize this.
And, sooner or later,
older Christians also see that
there is no permanent security on earth.

It is those of us who are middle-aged
that most often lose sight of this fact,
who settle down,
try to achieve success,
obtain and pay for 30-year mortgages...
We pay only lip service
to the concept of "nonconformity",
of being separated, not belonging in the
world.

Many people in our society are alienated,
not really belonging,
but are *better* described as aimless vagrants
rather than as pilgrims.

Abraham and these other examples of faith
weren't aimless vagrants.

They all had an aim,
for they all had a glimpse from afar
of God's city.

They shared the vision of John in
Revelation 21:

Then I saw a new heaven
and a new earth,
for the first heaven and the first
earth
had passed away,
and there was no longer any sea.
I saw the Holy City,
the new Jerusalem,
coming down out of heaven
from God,
prepared as a bride
beautifully dressed for her
husband.

And I heard a loud voice from
the throne, saying,

"Now the dwelling of God is
with men,
and he will live with them.
They will be his people,
and God himself will be with
them
and be their God.

He will wipe every tear from
their eyes.

There will be no more death
or mourning
or crying or pain,
for the old order of things
has passed away."

He who was seated on the throne
said,

"I am making everything
new!"

(Rev. 21:1-5a)

Let me read also from Isaiah (chapter 65),
who also had a glimpse of this city.

He hears God announce,

"Behold, I will create

new heavens and a *new* earth.
The former things will not be
remembered,
nor will they come to mind.
But be glad and rejoice forever
in what I will create,
for I will create Jerusalem
to be a delight,
and its people a joy.
I will rejoice over Jerusalem
and take delight in my people.
The sound of weeping and of
crying
will be heard in it no more.

Never again will there be in it
an infant that lives but a few
days,
or an old man who does not live
out his years.
He who dies at a hundred
will be thought a mere youth.
He who fails to reach a hundred
will be considered accursed.
They will build houses and dwell
in them.
They will plant vineyards and eat
their fruit.
No longer will they build houses
and *others* live in them,
or plant and *others* eat.
For as the days of a tree,
so will be the days of my people.
My chosen ones will long enjoy
the works of their hands.
They will not toil in vain
or bear children doomed to
misfortune.
For they will be a people blessed
by the Lord,
they and their descendants with
them.
Before they call I will answer,
while they are still speaking I
will hear.
The wolf and the lamb will feed
together,

and the lion will eat straw like
the ox,
but dust will be the serpent's
food.
They will neither harm nor
destroy
in all my holy mountain,"
says the Lord.
(Isaiah 65:17-25)

Faith, we are told in Hebrews,
"gives substance to our hopes,
and makes us certain of realities
we do not see."
(NEB Hebrews 11:1)

We can easily be discouraged
by the reality of human misery in the world,
the broken bodies,
broken relationships,
broken lives,
and say, "What's the use?"
or (worse yet)
we can perhaps become oblivious to it
in our search for our own security.

But for God's pilgrims,
these strangers and aliens "longing for a
better country",
faith is able to give substance to their
hopes...
make them certain of realities they do not
see...
the reality of God's future
in which there will be no more kids with
withered bodies
or damaged brains,
no more people suffering thru
the overwhelming pain of terminal cancer.
No more bombs will drop to maim and kill.
No more babies will slowly die of
starvation,
and no more people will have to struggle to
survive
while others live in luxury.

Faith can make them certain of
the reality of God's future

when there won't be any more people
crushed by oppressive political and
economic systems,
or men destroying themselves and others
thru selfishness and sin....
when there will be no more broken homes,
loneliness, depression.
No more slaughter of innocent people
in places like Central America,
the Persian Gulf, South Africa, Lebanon...
no more rebellion against God's rule in his
world.

The faithful don't include those
who have the attitude,
"To hell with the world,
so long as I have my eternal security!"

God's future is a reality which we do not
see,
but a reality of which the faithful are
certain,
and the disparity between what they see in
the world
and this vision of God's plan
brings them frustration and grief and pain...
makes them strangers and aliens,
in spite of their need for a place to belong.

Too many Christians want to be like the
world
and be respected by it.
They want to live in Canaan
and enjoy the goodies of Babylon.
But it is impossible to live according to the
old order
and remain faithful to the new.
To the extent we live in the old age,
we do not participate in the new age.

David's Jerusalem was a city
chosen to provide a stable foundation
for the Hebrews...
to provide security--
not just military and social security,
but religious security,
a city where it was thought that

God would dwell in a temple of stone.

But in Chapter 13, the final chapter of
Hebrews,
it is pointed out that

"Jesus...
suffered *outside* the city gate..."
(13:12)

If Jesus, our Lord, was an outsider,
then to follow him may require
that we also be outsiders.

As the book says in this final chapter,

Let us, then,
go to him **outside** the camp,
bearing the disgrace he bore.
For here we do not have an
enduring city,
but we are looking for the city
that is to come.
(13:13-14)

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There's something else I noticed
while studying this scripture from the book
of Hebrews:

It says of Abraham,
who obeyed God's call to leave home
and to travel to the promised land, that
By faith he made his home **in the promised
land**

"like a stranger in a foreign
country..."
(Hebrews 11:9)

He did not arrive in the promised land
and settle down there,
but remained
"like a stranger in a foreign country."

We have been called by God
to enter His Kingdom,
forsaking what the world views as security.
We admit to being
strangers and aliens on earth.
But we may discover that
we make our home in the church,

the "promised land",
like a stranger in a foreign country.

There are those in our church who,
having glimpsed God's new city from afar,
are like strangers and aliens among us,
never quite fitting in.

Like Abraham,
they may not be strangers by conscious
choice,
but they are able to admit, reluctantly,
if only to themselves,
to being aliens and strangers.
To admit this can be painful,
more so than the rest of us realize.
It's painful to be viewed with suspicion,
to be considered an outsider
by those of us who are more comfortable
with the way the church is...
those of us who feel threatened
by people pointing out its shortcomings,
comparing it to what they have glimpsed
of God's new city.

As I prepared this sermon,
several of these "strangers in the promised
land"
came to mind,
in this congregation, past and present.
I've sympathized with them,
admired them,
felt challenged by them.
And I thank God for them,
even though I haven't the courage
to be counted among them.
Some of them remain with us,
while others have left
to look elsewhere for a church "home."

Maybe we can learn to accept
that we have to live as a stranger and alien
on earth,
that is, separate and unconformed to society.
After all, to fit into a sick society is to be sick.
It is tragic, however,
to live as a stranger in the promised land,

that is, in the church!

The author of Hebrews advises us,
Do not forget to entertain
strangers,
for by so doing
some people have entertained
angels
without knowing it. (*Hebrews*
3:2)

The Hebrew word translated "angel"
means "messenger".
He is not referring
to supernatural beings, perhaps,
but to angels in the sense of "God's
messengers".
I would suggest that we take this in
particular
to include a request
that we be more open and accepting
to these "strangers in the promised land",
who just might be, in many instances,
"God's messengers".

It's not only these prophets who might be
strangers and aliens in the promised land.
There are others among us
who might feel like outsiders
because they don't have
an ethnic Mennonite name,
who feel bewildered when acronyms
like MCC, GC, and VS are tossed around.
Or because they don't feel theologically
correct.

John Miller, of Reba Place Fellowship,
has written that

[Jesus expected] "... that out of His
work
a movement would arise,
a people who would live
together
in the spirit of a close and loving
family.

One of the most important

and distinctive insights of the early
anabaptists
was that sin is alienation
from God's covenant community,
sin is broken relationships,
and that to be saved
is to be in authentic relationship
in a community with fellow Christians
under the lordship of Christ.

Many persons are drawn
to the Mennonite Church
because of this emphasis on community.
I felt, when I discovered
the small Mennonite fellowship
in Evanston, Illinois,
that I was "coming home",
that I had found a place to belong.

I grew up in the church (a Methodist
church)
but with no definite commitment
to the person of Christ
or to the Christian faith.
While a university student,
I had a sense of being alienated,
of not belonging, of having no direction.
I was always something of a "loner",
who now was becoming
uncomfortable with aloneness.
What attracted me to Christianity
was not a system of beliefs,
but a community of Christian students
(IVCF),
and what I learned of the person of Christ.
I made a commitment to Christ
during my senior year.
I became a follower, a disciple.
But in the evangelical group
which had drawn me to Christ,
I felt still an outsider,
because I was not a believer in their eyes.
For example,
I couldn't accept their view of the
atonement,
which meant by the phrase
"Christ died for my sins"

that he had paid the legal penalty
demanded by a just God
in payment for my transgressions.
And I couldn't accept their view of the
inspiration and the inerrancy of scripture.
There were other doctrines as well
that I may not have rejected,
but of which I remained skeptical.
Some, like the bodily resurrection of Christ,
I later became convinced of.
Others, like calling Jesus the "Son of God",
are mysteries to me which I still cannot
grasp.
Because I didn't have the "correct" beliefs,
I felt an outsider,
not fully belonging to this community
which had drawn me to Christian faith.

Such, I think, is not
the anabaptist concept of Christian
community,
which is that Christian faith is a way of life,
not a method of worship
or a set of propositions to be believed.

Jesus called his disciples, saying,
"Come follow"..
not "Come believe" some creed.
The community which he gathered
was a community of followers, not
believers.
They didn't become disciples
by subscribing to some statement of faith.
They simply decided to follow Him.
He didn't even teach them who He was.
It was only after living with him
for a couple of years
that they came to realize on their own
who He was,
and even then their understanding
was far from complete.

We also become followers and disciples
before we become believers.
And it is followers and disciples
that make up our community here
at First Mennonite.

I hope no one feels an outsider among us
who is following Christ,
committed to His lordship,
but who may not be committed
to some doctrine or other,
whether expressed from the pulpit,
the Sunday School quarterly,
the Gospel Herald, or others in the
community.

The Gospel is not to be intellectualized,
but to be lived,
and we are all disciples, being taught by
Christ,
but seeing "as in a glass darkly".

As members of God's Kingdom, it is
inevitable
that we will be strangers and aliens in the
world,
and will suffer,
either because of a sense of not belonging,
or because we are rejected by the world,
but certainly because we see the unnecessary
suffering
which results from the world's rejection of
God's plan.

But I pray that none of us will also have
the pain of feeling strangers and aliens
in the promised land!