



## LORD, TEACH US TO BE STRANGERS AND FOREIGNERS

August 11, 2019, Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Kimberly L. Clayton, The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

---

There is a 1930s' gospel song that goes:

This world is not my home, I'm just a passing through  
My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue  
The angels beckon me from heaven's open door  
And I can't feel at home in this world anymore

I thought of it because of the biblical texts assigned for this day. And because of the events that unfolded this past week. A week, once again, that can make us want to cry out: 'I can't feel at home in this world anymore.'

My daughter Katherine had just started first grade when she came home one day and in the course of our "how was your day?"-kind of conversation, she mentioned they had a drill at school. "Oh, a fire drill," I remarked. "No," my little 6-year-old replied, "it was a DP drill." This was a long time ago now; so long ago that the school administration did not think to inform parents that such a drill was going to occur. I had no idea what a DP drill was. My mind quickly searched those initials, trying to match them to words. But I did not understand. So the parent had to ask the child, "What is a DP drill, Katherine?" "A 'dangerous person' drill," she said in a rather quiet voice. I felt fear rise in my chest. "What happens in a DP drill?" I asked in what was suddenly not an ordinary 'how was your day?' conversation.

Then my little girl, who was barely taller than the doorknob that opened to her classroom said, "When the alarm goes off and they say 'DP,' the teacher locks the door and turns off the light. We all go to our cubbies and we have to be very quiet.



But if you are out in the hallway, then you go to the closest door, knock on it, and say, ‘I am not a dangerous person, can I come in?’” That day remains vivid, because it was the day when we, parent and child, grew up at the same time. Since then, of course, the problem has worsened and spread until we now all know the drill: Breaking news alert, shock, tears, a press conference with the police chief, or mayor, or governor, photos of victims appear in the media, then it is yesterday’s news. Until it is once again today’s news. Schools in multiple states; a church in Charleston, a synagogue in Pittsburgh, a mosque in Christchurch, NZ; a concert in Las Vegas, a garlic festival in California, and last week, in less than 24 hours, a Walmart in El Paso and a nightlife district in Dayton.

This past week, I took time to read the names of those who were killed...to know something about them...to pray for each one and those who loved them. Thirty-one this time, with more still in the hospital. But the long week was not yet finished. One more photograph appeared. Of a little girl sitting on the floor of a gym in Mississippi, her head in her hands, crying. On the floor in front of her, a paper plate with a slice of pizza served in a hasty, makeshift shelter. Her mother, maybe both parents, had been taken away by immigration officials on the first day of school. This little girl is not named and there is, I think, a profound significance in that missing detail. Nevertheless, like some of you, no doubt, I prayed for her, too; this little girl who has no name and yet has a thousand names.

In his book entitled *The Longing for Home*, Frederick Buechner begins:

*“Home sweet home. There’s no place like home. Home is where you hang your hat. ‘Home is the sailor, home from the sea, / And the hunter home from the hill.’ What the word home brings to mind before anything else,”* Buechner writes, “is a place, and in its fullest sense not just the place where you happen to be living at the time, but a very special place with very special attributes which make it clearly distinguishable from all other places...which you have rich and complex feelings about...a place where you feel you belong and which in some sense belongs to you, a place where



you feel that all is somehow ultimately well even if things aren't going all that well at any given moment.”<sup>i</sup>

Buechner describes, then, the place from his childhood where he felt most “at home.” Next, he recalls one of his earlier novels, *Treasure Hunt*. In it, Buechner was writing a scene of homecoming. The narrator, a young man named Antonio Parr, has been away for weeks and on his return, he finds that his small son and some other children have made a sign for him that reads, *WELCOME HONE*, with the last little leg of the *m* in *home* missing. Antonio didn't think that much about it when he first got home, though, of course, he noticed something missing, something out of whack, just a little thing. But later, Antonio reflects:

“*WELCOME HONE*, the sign said, and I can't help thinking again of Gideon and Barak, of Samson and David and all the rest of the crowd...who, because some small but crucial thing was missing, kept looking for it [no matter what], wherever they went till their eyes were dim and their arches fallen....In the long run I suppose it would be to think of everybody if you knew enough about them to think straight.”<sup>ii</sup>

Buechner then says: “The reference [in my novel], of course, is to the eleventh chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews, where, after listing some of the great heroes and heroines of biblical faith, the author writes, ‘These all died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.’”

Buechner says that when he was writing the novel, he only meant to have the sign read “Welcome Home,” but then it came to him for that small but crucial detail to be missing. And so, even though Antonio was very glad to be home at last, for a moment he felt like Gideon and Barak before him, that he was in some sense a stranger and foreigner there. “It is when he comes home,” Buechner writes, “that he recognizes most poignantly that he is, at a deep level of his being, homeless, and that whatever it is that is missing, he will spend the rest of his days longing for



it and seeking to find it.” And then Buechner writes: “All I know is that, like Antonio, I also sense that something of great importance is missing which I cannot easily name and which perhaps can never be named by any of us... In the meanwhile, like Gideon and Barak and the others, I know the sense of sadness and lostness that comes with feeling you are a stranger and a foreigner on the earth and that you would travel to the ends of that earth and beyond if you could ever find the homeland that up till now you have only glimpsed from afar.”<sup>iii</sup>

Sadness. Lostness. That is how many of us feel given the enormity of the challenges and tragedies that flit across news reports and scroll past on social media accounts, but are challenges and tragedies that are in fact not fleeting at all. They leave permanent marks in our lives and our life together. Upon the earth itself. So, surely we are in the crowd with Gideon and Barak and Samson and David and everyone else we have ever known, who long for home, which is surely not the world as it is.

Such sadness and lostness, is present in scripture, but it does not get the last word in the great Word of God. Old Testament scholar and thundering theologian, Walter Brueggemann, will not let us resign or retreat in sadness and lostness. This past month he wrote an article, “In the Company of the Unafraid.” In it, Walter summons us to faith and hope: “When we are contained in the world that is immediately in front of us,” he says, “we will inescapably end in despair. The inventory of despair-producers is well-known: The failure of public institutions; the collapse of moral consensus; the failure of political nerve; growing economic inequity; and the pervasiveness of top-down violence against the vulnerable.” And, we might add today, the violence we wield toward each other.<sup>iv</sup>

“The good news of the gospel,” he declares, “is that we need not be contained within that immediate world; ‘hoppers’ refuse to be so contained.” He calls upon Hebrews 11:1 as his text: ‘Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.’ Buechner poignantly surfaces the longing and sadness that comes from a deep sense that ‘this world is not my home.’ Brueggemann finds in Hebrews 11 a call to action:



“That chapter in the Bible,” Brueggemann states, “contains a roster of Jewish hopers who refused resignation to what was in front of them. What these hopers have in common is that they knew and trusted that God’s alternative world is crowding in on the dominant world of despair and will—soon or late—overcome it. The good world of God’s promise is marked by restorative justice, compassion, and mercy. Hopers who trust in this coming world refuse despair, trust the promises of God, and actively engage in the performance of that new world. Against such resolve,” Walter declares, “despair has no chance in the long run! God’s peculiar hope is reliable ground for not allowing the fears of the present to define or overpower us.”

He goes on to remind us that the promises of God well up powerfully precisely in contexts of urgent need: Abraham and Sarah old, without an heir and so without a future place their hope in God, who promises that against all biological odds, an heir will be given, a future opened. In our reading from Isaiah, the political powers swagger before little Judah and do their worst to destroy; a long exile ensues. But prophets like Isaiah rise up. Isaiah rains down words of judgment. Their elegant worship will never do before God, while violence and injustice run rampant in the streets. A scathing indictment against the faithful unfolds in Isaiah 1. Yet in that chapter, in verses 16-18, there surfaces the merest utterance of hope. But that tiny kernel of hope is enough to keep going for 60 long chapters and 70 long year of exile. God reminds them to do good, to seek justice, to rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, and plead for the widow, And if they will, if we will, then there is hope. Destruction and exile will not have the last word. There is a future. And in the New Testament, Luke’s Gospel begins listing all the political and religious powers of the day ordering people around by way of a government census. But there is a bigger movement going on beyond their notice. Earlier still in Luke, a young woman sings. And her song of a world that is about to turn and be turned upside down is born in Jesus.

The present world arrangement is governed by fear and by imagined fear. Isaiah 1 and Hebrews 11 invite us instead to imagine, enact, and perform, God’s alternate



world. To take our place in the crowd of hoppers. To live as strangers and foreigners in the world of injustice, fear, and violence. *That* world is not our home. To seek instead a homeland, a better country, a heavenly one. To enact, and perform our ‘strange and foreign’ acts of love, mercy, generosity, hospitality, justice and non-violence in *this* world until all that is set against God’s purposes is crowded out and overcome.

One of my friends is the pastor of a Presbyterian Church in Atlanta. For some years now, too many years, they have had poles staked in the ground outside their sanctuary. Between the poles, wire is strung, stretching at a distance. Tied to the wire are ribbons of many colors. Each one bears the name of a person who has died by gun violence. They flutter in the wind, every color imaginable, bearing silent witness to a world that is not our home; at least not the home God would have it be. I thought of the members of that congregation this past week. Cutting 31 more strips of ribbon, writing 31 more names, tying 31 new colors; a rainbow born of tears. Sadness; lostness given expression. Yet, the last word belongs to God alone.

So, Christians, we are to be doers of the Word and hoppers in God. Not falling into despair or resignation or complacency, our elegant worship must be matched by intentional acts. We must do something. What? What can we do? We can speak the names of those die and suffer from violence and injustice, praying for them and for those who loved them. Do something. What can we do? We can publicly state without qualification that words and acts of hate and prejudice are contrary to the will of God and have no place among us. We can examine our own lives and our life together, rooting out within us any speech or action that marginalizes or oppresses or denigrates or de-humanizes others. Do something. What can we do? We can talk to one another, find ways to mutually support reform in our systems of justice and laws that will promote greater life, health, and freedom. Do something. What can we do? Every time, we can choose love over fear. God is sovereign. God’s promises are sure. God makes a way out of no way, a future out of every dead end. Right now the purposes of God are crowding out the plans of evil. We refuse to be contained by the world that is immediately in front of us because we seek a homeland, a better country that is here on earth as it is in heaven.



Lord, teach us to be strangers and foreigners on the earth until every sign beckons, ‘Welcome Home’ and nothing, not even the smallest detail, is missing.

*Amen.*

---

<sup>i</sup> Frederick Buechner, **The Longing for Home** (HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 7.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid, 17. (“Treasure Hunt” is found in Buchner’s **The Book of Bebb** (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990), p.529.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>iv</sup> <https://sojo.net/magazine/july-2019/company-unafraid>