

September 2, 2007
14th Sunday After Pentecost

“An Exciting Destination”

Hebrews 13:1-7

Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body. Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous. Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” So we can confidently say, “The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?” Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.

Have you ever gone on a long road trip with friends or family for vacation? It's a lot different today than it used to be, with all the iPods and DVD players to keep you distracted. I can remember a trip from the suburbs northwest of Chicago to see my mother's family in Tennessee. Dad, mom, my sisters and I woke up real early and piled in the already-packed car and hit the road. Despite our sleepiness from waking before the sun was up, there was an air of excitement and as the trip began. My young mind could remember previous trips to the beautiful hills of central Tennessee. I was thinking of the neat attractions we'd visit and especially of all the great places there would be to play with my G.I. Joe Rescue Rig. The excitement and fascination with the trip was maintained as we circled the metro area and could see the magnificent Chicago skyline in the distance. I felt as if my family was off on a grand adventure.

Then came Indiana. I mean no offense to any Hoosiers and I say this with no malice; Indiana is a long and boring state. It takes hours to cross from north to south. After the first fifty miles of cornfields, the sense of adventure had been replaced by tedium and boredom. After 150 miles of cornfields we were looking for anything to distract us, my mother valiantly (or should I say desperately) coming up with travel games and snacks to keep us occupied. After 250 miles of cornfields us kids were getting whiney, which irritated mom and began to elicit some not-so-veiled threats from dad. Everybody's mind became kind of numb, focused on the dreariness of being stuck in the car and simply wanting to do something else—anything else. The anticipation and expectations of the destination were not forgotten, but the goal of Tennessee seemed to have lost some of its luster in the face of the grueling journey.

This is kind of where we find the people to whom the letter of Hebrews was written. They were new Christians, full of excitement and enthusiasm, living in hopeful expectation of the return of Christ Jesus. They lived in love of God and love of neighbor, striving toward humble servitude to one another in imitation of Christ. They faced persecution in steadfast faith, holding on tightly to the promise of salvation and struggling to live God pleasing lives. But time passed and Christ's second coming didn't happen. Some began to become weary of the hardships they faced because of their faith.

Just to be clear—I don't equate driving through Indiana with your family and facing deadly persecution for your faith as equal circumstances. But there is some similarity. Both the original receivers of this letter and we today are on the same journey of faith, navigating a sinful world while looking toward the return of Christ Jesus. It's a long road and we have a tendency to get uncomfortable, bored, uninterested in the destination, even jaded. Like little kids stuck in the back seat, even though we are family on the same journey we can start getting annoyed and irritated with one another, even tormenting each other. I seem to remember an exchange taking place during which I'd hold my finger very close to my little sister Debbie. She'd say, “Stop touching me!” and I'd retort, “But I'm not touching you!” This would continue until dad issued the threat of touching both of us.

It sounds childish, but the fact is that we act childish. We act worldly. We and the original readers of Hebrews acted in ways that don't fit with Christians living in expectation of Christ. I'm not saying we lose our faith, but we can allow the struggles of daily life to overshadow the promise ahead of us. Our faith "loses its luster," so to speak. We stop being excited about all Christ has done for us in His suffering and dying on the cross and rising to life again. The truth that an everlasting life in God's presence awaits us seems so far off that it fades in our minds, covered over by the more immediate struggles and challenges of our every day life in a fallen world. We become like the kid in the car. The joy of the vacation destination forgotten, we look around for some more immediate distraction or pleasure. And unfortunately, the immediate distraction we find all too often is a sinful pleasure, an act far outside of what God intends for His children.

That's what this letter is all about—restoring a focus on the reality of our journey. It is an exhortation not to become weary in our walk of faith, but to remain excited about where we are going—who we are going to. Even more than that, it is an exhortation to realize that we are already living in the reality of the kingdom of God.

If you need a spiritual boost, take an hour and read Hebrews. It is a proclamation of what Christ has done for us as God and Savior, a prophet and King above all others. It boldly speaks of how Jesus as our high priest has made the all-atoning sacrifice of himself to pay for all sin. It compares the old way of sacrifice; the over and over again sacrifice of animals as payment for sin—a payment that could never ever be finished, to Jesus' giving of his pure and innocent life once and for all sacrifice that completely paid sins' price hanging over our heads. Christ our eternal high priest established a new covenant under which we can finally stand righteous before God. Chapter 10 states, "*But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.*" And a bit later states, "*and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.*"

That's just a taste of the reassurance God's Word gives us, the Word that excites us and remind us of who we are. We are the righteous. We are those who in faith receive the benefit of that most pure and all-encompassing sacrifice. We stand washed by Christ's blood and the pure water of Holy Baptism! We are in a fallen world, but through Christ, our high priest who continually intercedes between us and condemnation, we also stand already in God's eternal kingdom.

And we arrive at today's reading—not a laundry list of rules, but an exhortation to live out the reality Christ has obtained for us. "*Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body. Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous. Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."*

This is who we are. If you look at your life and you don't see this in yourself, consider if you are dwelling on the fallen world instead of the destination and the high priest who has won your entrance there. Are you withholding brotherly love, possibly even from a fellow believer by holding ill will or grudges? Do you treat strangers as strangers rather than as neighbors deserving hospitality? Do you avoid those suffering troubles and hardships? Does lust for money, sex or other worldly pursuits seem to be the driving force in life?

Turn your eyes to the destination. Ungodly things of this world are crumbling cities that don't last—dying places along the way that tempt you to cut the journey short. Look forward. See the glorious city that is yet to come! Christ has bought us passage and gives us what we need for the trip. We receive strength in prayer. We receive wisdom, guidance and power through His Word and the example of the leaders in the faith who have gone before us. Our faith is invigorated as we receive Jesus very body and

blood in the holy supper and hear the sweet words of forgiveness spoken again and again. Receive all of these gifts and return praise to God through song and service with eyes and heart oriented on the promised kingdom in which we both now and not yet live.

Live the reality out in your lives. As you do, you will be reminded of God's presence again and again, for He is the reality in which you live. Find Him in His Word. Find Him in fellowship with one another. Find Him in prayer. Imitate Him in service to others. Live out His love in eager anticipation of the fulfillment of all things. See how He reveals Himself to you daily. Finding Christ in your life will excite you.

As a kid, we didn't stay focused on the doldrums of long-distance car travel. We were always given a sign that made us look toward our destination. Somewhere past the 300 mile mark my dad would make the proclamation: "See Ruby Falls!" It's probably the most billboard-touted attraction in Tennessee. We would see those signs and know our hoped for destination was ahead of us and the excitement would return.

God shows His presence among us in many ways and continues to point to our glorious destination. Live not in the doldrums of a dying world. Live in the promise. Live the excitement. Live out the reality and identity that Jesus our high priest has given us. Rejoice and live out life in thankfulness for what Christ made us through His sacrifice. Live the reality Christ has made you and your life itself will naturally be a sacrifice pleasing to God.