



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“TODAY’S PILGRIMS”

John Galbreath
Bible Study Series

Text: Hebrews 11:15
Date: November 18, 1962

About Westminster's Galbreath Bible Study Series:

This lesson is one taken from a sermon preached by John Galbreath at Westminster Presbyterian Church on November 18, 1961.

To complete the lesson, we suggest that you begin by reading the designated Bible passage (Hebrews 11:15).

Then, review the study questions posed about the lesson — whether by yourself or in your small group.

Finally, share your thoughts on the Galbreath Bible Study blog on the Westminster Intranet.

I. The deacons announced this week that in keeping with the request of the Council of Churches our congregation will take part in the sponsorship of a Cuban family in our community. All of the churches of the community have been asked to take a family but a number of us who have exceptional records in the relocation of families have been particularly asked to take this responsibility. Within two weeks there will be a plane of Cubans arrive at municipal airport and one of these families will come to our church and to our community.

II. This is a rather unsatisfactory arrangement. Previously when we were relocating families we could study a dossier and know something of the family background, the educational training and just about anything we needed to know about these persons but in this case we don't know the educational background, we aren't even certain that it will be a family nor how many in the family. We don't know whether it is a PhD in Physics or a person who has done nothing but cut sugar cane all his life.

III. This is a very poor time and a very poor place to be entering into but unfortunately the coming to this land was not the choice of the 150,000 refugees in Miami. Tyrants do not ask for a choice of time and place and those who are in this country are here because they must flee Castro and communism. We are not talking in terms that are theoretical but we are talking about real live persons who need help and because this is a situation that requires immediate solution; therefore we are taking this act of faith that in many ways seems somewhat illogical. You will be pleased to know that we have found an opportunity for employment for the bread winner, whether it is the ultimate employment will depend upon his training and ability but at least we do have that major problem solved.

IV. We may be needing clothing or blankets or furniture and these problems will be handled through Mr. Beams. If you have some furniture that you can spare we would be very pleased to know of it if you call the church office. As soon as we get information, and we do hope shortly before they arrive to have a little clearer idea of who we will be receiving, we will get the information out and see if there is clothing or other ways that you can help. If you are fluent in Spanish, this too might prove very helpful.

V. It is appropriate that in this season when we are celebrating the coming of the first Pilgrims to these our shores that we take occasion to welcome these pilgrims even to our own community – pilgrims who have come for much the same reason as did the original ones. The first Puritan fathers came at a very poor time and landed at a very poor place. They set sail in late September about the time that the North Atlantic gales begin to stir up and the coming winter winds are advancing. Over 100 of the Pilgrims boarded the ship that was possibly no larger than our river tow boats and over a period of 63 days finally landed upon our shores. They landed in a hostile community where the Indians did not welcome them, a place where there was no roof to protect them, where they were no fresh fruits or vegetables to sustain them through the long winter that lay ahead. It would have been so much easier if these folks has simply acquiesced or if they had said, “Well, what you believe is just a matter of where you were born and let’s not be prejudiced and see eye to eye with the king on these matters” and I suppose in many ways it would have solved a good many problems if our Cuban friends had said, “Well, it doesn’t much matter whether we believe in freedom or communism, Castro really can’t be as bad as he claims” and had settled down to try to keep quiet in a land of tyranny.

VI. Those of us who have inherited freedom sometimes forget how deep a fire it burns in the hearts of those who are denied this which is our common heritage. So it was that the first Pilgrims, so it is that today pilgrims to our shores have chosen a bad time and a bad place to come to be among us.

VII. We think of Pilgrim largely in terms of those who came in 1620 but pilgrim is a very old word and even older concept. Scripture is replete with references to pilgrim and pilgrimage. The word "Hebrew" cannot be better translated than the word pilgrim. In its original usage as we have found it in secular documents found throughout the ancient East, the word "Habiru" did not refer to the descendants of a particular man and woman. They referred to a strata of society. They refer to the homeless ones, the gypsies, the wanderers, the riffraff, the people who wouldn't settle down and it was from this group of these homeless ones that God chose a nation. Nor do we find that they lacked this sense of beyondness once they had been chosen of God. This was indeed a mark of their chosenness. Abraham leaving home, going with his family not knowing where he was going except for the confidence that somehow God had chosen a place for him. There was a promised land where he could take his family and his herds and there find a home. So following up through the wilderness that is known now as the Fertile Crescent, he came down into what is now known as the mountains of Palestine and he settled there as much as a nomad people could settle but then there came the starvation and drought that drove the people of this time into Egypt. And you remember the story of Joseph and the coat of many colors and how he was in a position of great authority in Egypt and once more he gave the people a home. But this home too was illusory because in a generation or two even those who had been a kin of him in high position became instead the slaves of the people. And once more Moses called them out to find a new home and from that there was a time in the wilderness, the wandering. And Moses led them forth even to the very edge of promised land and when he was just about to cross, life was taken from him – just short of home.

VIII. The others under Joshua went over across Jordan and settled again where Abraham had once lived. There they took Jerusalem and the cities round about and established their homes in flocks but were not there too many generations until once more exile descended and they were taken into Babylon once more as wanderers and homeless ones. A few trickling back to Jerusalem and longing for the time when the fulfillment should come not when they should simply have walls to a city but when it should be that city made of God and so we find the words of the prophet Isaiah longing for the time when the Messiah should come and God's true home and kingdom be established.

IX. All through the old testament we find this beyondness – something they were seeking for but the moment they seemed to clutch it, it was illusion. Lot thought he had found a home, the nephew of Abraham, only to be destroyed. Jacob thought that he had found a home only to find his sons turn against Joseph and seemingly to have done him in. They thought they had found a home in the land of Goshen in Egypt only to be enslaved. They thought they had a home back in Palestine only to lose it again. There was nothing permanent – there was always a beyondness, indeed it was the times in which they thought they were home that Israel's workshop and that Israel's faith was shattered. It was a part of God's call that they should be a homeless people. They were all through their history Habiru, Hebrew, homeless ones but not aimless ones for through it all there was the confidence that there was purpose, there was a direction, there was a promised land to which God had called them – not in terms of acreage or soil but in much more ultimate terms of purpose and meaning. All the history of the Jew up to that time of Christ was simply a preparation, a looking forward, a pilgrimage up to the time of fruition in Jesus Christ. This was an exile time, a time of passing through until God is fulfilled in Jesus himself and yet even in Jesus we find a pilgrim, Him who had "no place to lay his head," owned not except that which he could carry upon his own body – the homeless one but not the aimless one.

X. The night Jesus was betrayed he said, "I go to prepare a place for you and if I go and prepare a place for you I will come again and receive you unto myself." Now at least you see He was as Moses within sight of home.

XI. Home always seems to be at a distance, something yet to be accomplished and fulfilled, never quite achieved. Jesus Christ was a pilgrim and came in order that once and for all men might find the meaning of home.

XII. The early church, too, knew its pilgrimage. The writer of Hebrews spoke of the Christians as exiles and strangers in the land and in that magnificent chapter that was read in scripture this morning the first verse of which is particularly familiar to us all, the chapter on faith, the writer reminds us that faith is the certainty of realities that we cannot see. It is this drivenness, it is the power behind our drivenness, the drivenness of the Hebrew people, the drivenness of Christ and our own drivenness as disciples of Jesus Christ. It is this that makes us pilgrims, that kept Abraham from wanting to go back to Ur, that kept others from being satisfied with their own land.

XIII. We are a pilgrim people. Paul said it in another way. He said, “We are citizens of heaven, heaven is our ultimate citizenship and our ultimate home.” This was a familiar idiom to Paul because he himself was not a citizen of the land in which he lived. We are told that he was a citizen of Rome, though he himself had perhaps never been there up to the time of this writing. Roman citizenship was conferred in instances of great courage or loyalty to the emperor. Paul himself probably had not received it personally but had inherited it perhaps from a father who had been granted the privilege of Roman citizenship. It meant a great many privileges that did not go to others. We will remember the occasion in which Paul took particular advantage of his Roman citizenship when having been flogged and in prison he let it be known that he had been so judged before he had had trial. This was illegal, of course, and the magistrate was deeply concerned when he found that he had thus punished one who had not already been tried. Roman citizenship therefore meant a great privilege to Paul and he saw the same idiom in terms of Christian citizenship that those who accepted Jesus Christ as Lord while living within the world had their citizenship beyond the world in heaven itself and with it all the privileges of being children of God – not born of their virtue but as Paul himself had received citizenship simply as an heir of that which had been freely given to them. But Paul also knew that Roman citizenship entailed certain responsibilities. The men of such inheritance could not live just as any other man but there was a noblesse oblige, a sense of dignity and respect that was expected of a man that had Roman citizenship that could not be expected of the common barbarian. Paul calls us all to that citizenship and to that pilgrimage that is found in Jesus Christ alone.

XIV. This past week our kindergartner came home with a picture made from construction paper and proudly showed it to the family. She said, “Here is a picture I made in kindergarten, do you know what it is?” and one of the youngsters very quickly said, since this was just after Halloween “Why, of course, it’s a witch” and Lisa was very distressed. She said, “No, that’s not a witch, that’s a pilgrim. Witches have pointed hats.” Well, how can you tell a pilgrim? It means more than wearing a flat hat.

XV. If our contemporary pilgrim comes to us perhaps he'll get off the plane with bongo drums and a big straw hat, although I doubt it, and we'll say, "This is our pilgrim." But certainly the bongo drums won't last long if he ever brings them at all. The only way we will recognize our pilgrim in our midst is probably when he speaks and we will hear a Spanish accent. This will mark him as our pilgrim. But how are you and I who are also called to be pilgrims to be marked from others about us. How is it that we are different from those in the world, those who have not been called of God for his special purpose?

XVI. The answer does not lie in a flat hat nor bongo drums. We with our wall-to-wall conformity to the world about us, if we are indeed to be known as pilgrims it cannot be in our clothing or our accent nor our accoutrements but in our action and in our spirit. Herein are the fruits of the spirit of love and joy and peace that set us aside as God's pilgrims. We have become so domesticated and there is great danger in this just as there was grave danger every time that Israel thought that she had settled down and found home. This is her hour of deepest peril.

XVII. We are not true to God until we have discovered our pilgrimage, until we realize that this is not our citizenship but that we are citizens of that kingdom of God's own creation and that heaven alone is our home.

XVIII. As citizens of the Kingdom of God, as children of God the Father we have special privileges but most of the time we are unmindful of it.

XIX. I remember when traveling abroad for the most part I didn't think of my passport strapped to my waist but then I remember one evening getting into an information conversation in Rome and talking a bit too freely about my particular opinions of Mr. Mussolini only to discover the he to whom I was speaking was an undercover agent of the Police State. I reached very fast for my passport. It could have been the difference between life and death. This was my hope of freedom. I had spoken as no Italian had dared to speak and yet I was safe because my citizenship was elsewhere.

XX. So we also who are of Christ have a citizenship which frees us from the pettiness of the world about us to be free through God through Jesus Christ but sometimes it takes the deep experiences of life to jolt us back into awareness of our citizenship. Sometimes we have to pass through the mysteries of birth and death, or hardship and anxiety to reach once more for those eternal truths that were there all the time but of which all too easily we had become unaware.

XXI. Our citizenship, our pilgrimage calls us not alone however to privilege but to responsibility. This world of which we are a part is not irrelevant. God is not simply leaving us here in cold storage until he has our mansion built for us in heaven. Scriptures say in John 3:16 that "God so loved the world that he gave even His only begotten son that whosoever believed in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." In other words, the world of which we are a part; though this is not our ultimate citizenship it is of vital concern to God, of so deep a concern that God sent Jesus Christ Himself here to live and to die. Therefore, we who are in the world are not here just to pass the time till Jesus saves, but Jesus Christ said, "As the Father hath sent me, so I send you." We are here to carry out God's redemptive purpose within the world. This is our purpose for being here though our end may be beyond life itself.

XXII. This was all bound up in the nature of faith. Faith, a strand that ran from the call of Abraham out of the comfort of Ur to a land that he knew not, the call of Joseph to the land of Egypt, the call of Moses into the wilderness of Sinai, the call of Ezra and Nehemiah to lead the people out of exile, the call we hear in Isaiah of the coming of a Messiah and the call of Jesus Christ. It is in this beyondness that we find our hope and in the call to share in God's redemptive purpose that we ourselves find meaning. For we are not citizens alone of this world but our citizenship as Paul has told the church in Philippi lies in heaven. This leaves us free to be redemptive within the world, to bring reconciliation between men and man and between man and God. This is our heritage – this is our mission in the world that God so loved.

Study Questions -- Part I

Bible Reading: Hebrews 11:15

Hebrews 11:15 says: ¹⁵ And indeed if they had been thinking of that *country* from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return.

- How do you think people of that time viewed moving from country to country? How is that different from how we view it today?

Study Questions -- Part II

Sermon :

I -- When you think of the church settling and sponsoring refugees what does it make you think about? How would you feel about that happening today? From what location do you think that family might come?

II – If you were part of a team settling a refugee family, what kind of information would you want to have ahead of time to help them to feel welcomed and at home when they arrived?

III – What do you think it must have been like for Christians in Cuba in the early 1960's?

IV – What in your house would you first think to offer to a family coming here to escape persecution? If you were on the end of the equation, what would you most want to have provided beyond the necessities of daily life?

V – Think about what the Massachusetts pilgrims faced. How do you think their faith impacted the transition?

VI – What reasons do you think drive pilgrims to our shores today? In what ways have those reasons changed since the 1620's?

VII – Has there been an event in your life that led to a physical pilgrimage? What about an emotional one?

VII – Why do you think the Bible tells of such an extensive series of pilgrimages and loss of home?

IX – When and where have you felt a sense of beyondness in your own life? How did your faith help you to find a connection again?

XI – Is there something you think God has put before you that has yet to be accomplished or fulfilled in your life?

XII – Clearly the scripture to which Dr. Galbreath refers is a longer passage than the one noted for the sermon. What passage do you think it might be?

XIII – How does your position as a “citizen of heaven” impact your earthly life?

XIII – Do you think the privileges of U.S. citizenship are the core of what drives refugees here? How can Christians help to extend those privileges to people around the world?

XIV – This story echoes one Tammy Yeager spoke about in a recent sermon. How can you encourage and support a child when you misunderstand that child's intention?

XV – Dr. Galbreath intentionally spoke of stereotypes that people might have had about someone arriving from Cuba. What stereotypes do you think people hold about refugees who arrive in this country today?

XVII – In what way can you discover your pilgrimage?

XVIII – What privileges do you have as a child of God? How can you help others to understand them?

XIX – Has there ever been a time in your life when you had an advantage because of your American citizenship? What about your citizenship in the Kingdom of God?

XXI – What responsibilities do you have as a citizen of that Kingdom of God? How do you go about fulfilling them?

XXII – How can your beyondness help you to better serve those in need, like the Cuban refugees whose arrival led to this sermon?