



“DESIRING A BETTER COUNTRY”
SCRIPTURE: ISAIAH 1:1, 10-20; HEBREWS 11: 1-3, 8-16
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
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The Rev. Dr. Marcia Mount Shoop, Pastor

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20

1:1 The vision of Isaiah son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

1:10 Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!

1:11 What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats.

1:12 When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more;

1:13 bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation-- I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.

1:14 Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them.

1:15 When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.

1:16 Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil,

1:17 learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

1:18 Come now, let us argue it out, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.

1:19 If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land;

1:20 but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

The Word of the LORD.
Thanks be to God.

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

11:1 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

11:2 Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval.

11:3 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.

11:8 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.

11:9 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.

11:10 For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

11:11 By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old--and Sarah herself was barren--because he considered him faithful who had promised.

11:12 Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, "as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore."

11:13 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,

11:14 for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.

11:15 If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return.

11:16 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.

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

Toni Morrison helped tell America our story—she called us to acquaint ourselves with characters who speak volumes about the pain, the promise, the brutality, the complexity, the impossibility of calling this American soil home. Her novels are haunting—they are defined by the poetry of her beautiful wisdom.

Her latest published work came out just a few months ago: *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations*. When word of her unexpected death came this week, having this new collection on my desk felt like a gift of the Spirit—a way to hear something new from her even as her writing has now abruptly ceased.

Many of her essays in the collection were written several years ago—her commentary on home, on foreignness, on black literature, on identity, on the necessity of the writer’s voice for humanity to see itself more clearly.

They seem to describe the current moment—an eerie reminder that what we are seeing today in America—at the border, in the board room, on the floor of Congress, in the White House, in schools, and in the streets, did not just emerge in the last three years, but are long-standing threads of the American story.

Morrison doesn’t want us to look away, but to look more closely at what is happening to and through us.

She writes in her essay, “Racism and Fascism,” “Fascism talks ideology, but it is really just marketing—marketing for power.”¹ She continues:

“[Fascism] is recognizable by its need to purge, by the strategies it uses to purge, and by its terror of truly democratic agendas. It is recognizable by its determination to convert all public services to private entrepreneurship... so that the narrow but protective chasm between governance and business disappears. It changes citizens into taxpayers—so individuals become angry at even the notion of the public good. It changes neighbors into consumers—so the measure of our value as humans is not our humanity or our compassion or our generosity but what we own. It changes parenting into panicking so that we vote against the interests of our own children; against *their* health care, *their* education, and *their* safety from weapons. And in effecting these changes it produces the perfect capitalist, one who is willing to kill a human being for a product or kill generations for control of products.”²

I wonder, what becomes of humanity if we stop yearning for a better world? If we stop desiring a better country?

What becomes of us if we find ourselves content with a way of life predicated on our numbness to the violence this way of life requires?

What becomes of us if our yearning, our desiring is divorced from a vision of God's creation redeemed?

The stories of our ancestors in faith are stories of yearning, stories of desiring—stories of wilderness wanderings, stories of second chances. Our forbearers were often lost, often grieving, often lamenting the loss of land, possession, power, and legitimacy, often lamenting the loss of home.

What does it mean that such a homesickness, such a yearning, defines our spiritual heritage? Especially as we find ourselves in a country intermittently reeling and then at turns wheeling and dealing about who it is that really has the right to be here in this so-called promised-land anyway.

Perhaps the most dangerous thing about our country's defining struggle over belonging is the way our collective yearning to belong mutated into a grotesque and unmitigated will to power.

And so now we find ourselves defined by a desire for a better country that is so tangled up with domination and consumption, that the very homeland we desired may have become impossible—all because we mistook our greed for a way home.

And we have come to a destination that is not the shining city on a hill, but a disintegrating republic—fractured by the unwillingness of the powerful to tell the truth about our limitations as a society, unwilling to repent, unwilling to turn around.

God builds the city that we yearn for—we are not the architects or the builders—faith teaches us to seek only to dwell there with gratitude and humility, in beloved community and in a true peace—the peace that can only be born out of justice that is treasured and preserved for the good of the whole city.

As Jesus followers we are always both sojourners in a strange land and at home in the world—living as dual citizens with both troubled and settled hearts.

But this dual disposition of faith does not define this country—this country who ironically bills itself as a Christian nation.

Otherwise we would not be where we are—children crying for the government to hear that they are afraid and just want their parents to come home; policies that enforce ignorance around the impact of guns on our health and well-being as a

nation; people of color brave enough to tell their country what being American is like for them only to be met with violence and blaming and insult to injury.

We would not be where we are today if our country was truly defined by the justice and generosity of Jesus—we would not be in a country where

“...if the average wealth held by white families magically stopped growing [today], it would take 228 years for the average wealth held by African Americans to catch up.... [Where] the median wealth from 1983 to 2016 for black families decreased by more than half, while white families saw their [median wealth] rise by 33 percent... [Today] white families have a median wealth of \$171,000, black families have a median wealth of just \$17,600.”³

We would not be in a country still in the tenacious grip of racism that has its annihilating tentacles spidering through every layer of our society.

These are all marks of an anxious, insecure republic—a people motivated to hoard and to hide. These are all marks of a nation without faith in God’s capacity to provide us with a way home to ourselves, to each other, to our Creator. And so we are restless and reactive—transition and tumult a constant generator of more fear, more brutality.

In her essay, “The Foreigner’s Home,” Morrison writes:

“The spectacle of mass movement draws attention inevitably to the borders, the porous places, the vulnerable points where one’s concept of home is seen as being menaced by foreigners. Much of the alarm hovering at the borders, the gates, is stoked, it seems to me, by (1) both the threat and the promise of globalism and (2) an uneasy relationship with our own foreignness, our own rapidly disintegrating sense of belonging.”⁴

I wonder, would we know belonging if we experienced it?

The people of Sodom and Gomorrah thought they could fake it until they make it—feigning the rituals of faith, but failing to live lives of justice. Showing themselves to be dissemblers—or at least those who mistook the trappings of piety to be sufficient for a life to be faithfully lived. God doesn’t pit religious practice against the work of justice, God simply says they must be intimately entangled— rituals and justice.

They were grasping for some kind of identity, some kind of legitimacy while creating the conditions for their own exile from the ground of their being, from the author of their purpose on this planet.

The people of Sodom and Gomorrah are pushed against a wall when Isaiah shares God's lament with them. Either put up or shut up, Isaiah tells them. Otherwise you will never truly come home to who God created you to be.

God calls them out—as one more attempt to call them in.

The preacher in Hebrews wanted anyone to hear to understand that trust in God's promises brings unexpected possibilities—and it is in spaces of hopelessness and exile that we find out what defines us.

The prophetic warnings to Sodom and Gomorrah and the heritage lesson to those seeking to follow Jesus after his death in the Book of Hebrews seem tailor made for our nation at this moment.

America is currently peering over a cliff. We are, indeed, being called out and called in—pushed to the edges of what it is that we truly value and aspire to as a nation.

It is a moment of truth—a critical fork in the road—what are we truly made of, what will we hold onto in our common life that is worth saving and that has any redemptive possibility?

In Morrison's essay, "Black Matter(s)," she invites the reader into a fascinating description of how her characters have emerged for her in her potent novels. She confesses intentionality, purpose in the kinds of characters that populate her work.

"In my own writing, in order to reveal what seems to me the hard and the true and the lasting things, I am drawn to describing people under duress, not in easy circumstances, but backed up in to a corner, people called upon to fish or cut bait. You say you are my friend? Let's see. You say you are a revolutionary? Let me see what it looks like when I push you all the way out. You say you love me? Let's see. What happens if you follow *your* course all the way through? What are the things you will give up? And, under duress, I know *who* they are, of what they are made, and which of their qualities is the last to go, and which of their qualities never go. It gives a melancholy cast to my work. I know. And it leads me to exceptional rather than routine characters. I know. And it leaves me wide open for criticism about bizarre characters and non-positive images. I know. But I'm afraid I will have to leave the 'positive' images to the comic strip artists and the 'normal' black characters to some future Doris Day, because I believe it is silly, not to say irresponsible, to concern myself with lipstick and Band-Aid when there is a plague in the land."⁵

Toni Morrison's yearning, her desiring for a better country made her hungry to challenge us to our own moment of truth—what are we made of, when we are under duress, when we are up against the wall, what will be left of us, what part of who we say we are, who we aspire to be, will remain?

What will remain of this nation that so many yearn to call home and that so many desire to be better?

This moment cannot be met with hesitancy or with feigned ritual untethered from justice. In our exile as God's people in a broken world, we are called to meet the wilderness with humility and trust—let America, let us as Americans, shed our greed and our anxiety as driving forces in this journey we are making together toward home.

Let our yearning, our desiring for a better country be fueled by the promise of a home place prepared and defined by God's healing justice and merciful love, a place where everyone is free.

And let us pray it's not too late for us to hear and believe God's "welcome home."

Thanks be to God.

¹ Morrison, Toni. "Racism and Facism," *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations*. (Knopf, New York, 2019), 15.

² Ibid, 15-16.

³ <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2019/07/the-wealth-gap-taints-americas-success-stories/593719/>

⁴ Morrison, 5-6.

⁵ Ibid, 224.