

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

When soldiers fighting in Vietnam had thirty days or less to serve before coming home, they were called "short-timers." It was a tradition that once a soldier reached that point, he made himself a "short-timer" stick. Cutting down a branch from a tree, a "short-timer" would carve it and put notches in it making it look rather elaborate, and every day he would cut off a notch from that stick indicating how many days he had left before he would come home. We can see from this how they yearned to return to their home country, to that place they often called "God's Country."

Our text for today in Hebrews 11 teaches us that all Christians are really "short-timers" here on earth. We, like those Vietnam soldiers, yearn within ourselves to go home, to go our Fatherland--God's Country in heaven. Abraham is our example in this. By faith, we're told, he lived as a stranger in the land of Promise. The land of Canaan God had promised to Abraham's descendants, yet Abraham never owned even one acre of land there. He pitched his tent from place to place. His livestock would graze upon the grass in the area and then he would move on to the next place. There was no "permanence" to his life. He made no roots. His was a "day-to-day" existence.

That's difficult for us to imagine. There may be days when it seems like we practically live at our job. There may be weeks when we're on the go almost non-stop, traveling here and there. But for us there is always a home to come back to. There is a "permanence" to our life. We live in a structure. We settle into a neighborhood. Our children attend a local school. We are familiar with the local businesses, banks, grocery stores, and restaurants. We do not live, as Abraham did, from place-to-place, day-to-day. We make a home for ourselves and live year by year, decade by decade. We grow roots where we are at.

Yet even with all the structure we have in life, we are exactly like Abraham in that we are strangers and pilgrims here on earth. No matter how settled in we may feel; no matter how long we have lived in a certain place, our life, too, is transitory; it's temporal. And there is plenty going on here on earth to remind us of this. Homes are gutted by fire. Neighborhoods are destroyed by tornadoes and floods. Oil spills and leaks create havoc in the Gulf and elsewhere. School buses crash on the highways and children become injured and even die. Jobs and careers come to a sudden halt with a termination notice. Our own bodies age and grow weak. Our friends and loved ones, one by one, are placed into a casket and lowered into the ground.

All this serves to remind us that we are "short-timers" here. Heaven is our home, not this world which is passing away. God has built for you a country, a permanent home through the life, death, and resurrection of your Savior, Jesus Christ. He lived and died for you so that His Fatherland would be your Fatherland. The soldiers, not in Vietnam, but in Jerusalem cut up a stick and carved notches into it. Not an elaborate stick, but a large one, and upon that stick they hung Jesus. And that stick, therefore...that cross has become your "short-timer" stick. Even though your days here are numbered, you do not need to be sad and depressed. You can look forward to, you can yearn for that country which has a lasting foundation, which Jesus' blood purchased for you--your dwelling place in heaven.

But have our spiritual senses become dulled by living in this sinful world? Are we losing that yearning for our real home above? Do we see ourselves not as "short-timers" here, but as "long-timers?" What thoughts entered your mind when hearing about that horrific crash on Interstate 44 last Thursday? "Life is a fleeting thing...I could be next...I need to be prepared by clinging ever tightly to Jesus," or "How sad...I'm glad it wasn't me"? When the oil leak was going full-bore, did it serve to awaken for you the truth that this life is not permanent and we should not hold on to it, or did you pay

little attention to the whole ordeal just glad that you live in Missouri? I guess what I'm asking is this...Where are you putting down roots? Into your job, your settled life, your community...or into the living, eternal, Word of God? Where is your focus day after day? Where do you spend your time? What do you talk about with your family and friends?

These are questions we need to consider. We're in our "Vietnam" here on earth. We're in the fight against the devil, against the sinful world around us, against our own sinful flesh. Let's not lose that yearning to go home. Let's keep our focus upon Christ Jesus. Let's keep His words of life in front of us, in our ears, before our eyes, within our hearts and minds.

I know of a Christian man who stopped doing this. He began to put down roots more in his job and home than in his church and God's Word. But something happened to that man. His daughter became sick, very sick. He loved her very much and as she got worse, and the doctors could not help her, he stayed by her bedside as she became weaker. It was the middle of the day but she said, "Daddy, it's getting dark, very dark. It's time for me to go to sleep now, isn't it?" "Yes," he replied, "It's time for you to go to sleep." He fixed her pillow, adjusted her covers, and laid his hand upon her head. "Good night, Daddy," she said, "I'll see you in the morning." And as a trusting child of God she entered into heaven. When her father tells this story he always ends it with, "I can hardly wait for morning." And that father, since that day, has changed his focus. He is in God's Word daily. He is in church to hear the good news of Jesus every Sunday. He is now putting down roots where he needs to. Now he yearns for heaven. Now his "short-timer" stick, Jesus' cross, is always before his eyes.

Whether you have a loved one waiting for you in heaven or not, Jesus loves you and yearns for you. Why do you think He led you here today? Why do you think He allows troubles to come to you? He wants to change your focus in life...away from this passing world to a heavenly world He gives you. He desires for you to know His love, to put down roots into His promises to you. That's what Abraham did and that's why he is in heaven today.

Have you been living not like Abraham? Have you been losing focus of the "one thing needful?" Have you been yearning not really for the things of God, but for a settled permanence here on earth? Repent. All of you need to repent...I need to repent. We are all guilty of this sinfulness, of living with unbelief in our heart.

Friend, you have a Savior. You have One who forgives you. Jesus, who washed you in baptism's waters, declares to you this day that you are forgiven of every sin. He knows all the wrongs you have done, and he forgives all your wrongs. And as you believe this, by God's grace, He places into your heart the right kind of yearning--a yearning for His words, for His Sacrament, for His Fatherland. He causes you to place roots into these things. He turns you to focus not so much on your temporal life here, but on His life for you--the eternal life He gives you freely by grace.

Two men are walking along the streets of a city. It's a cold winter's night, the snow is falling, the winds are blowing. The first wanders aimlessly here and there, seeking shelter wherever he can find it. He is homeless. He has no place to go. The second man is humming a tune even as he walks through the same snowstorm as the first man. He is returning home from Vietnam and is walking with purpose. For in the distance he sees the lights of his house. It will be warm there. A meal will be there for him. His family will be there to welcome him.

Dear Christian, you are that second man. You see your Fatherland off in the distance. You know where you are going through life. You're going home. You're going to your eternal home because of

Jesus. You're a "short-timer." Keep His stick, His cross, always in front of you. Soon, very soon, dawn will break and it will be morning, and you will be home. Amen.