

Second Sunday in Lent
Reformation, Media
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“But our Citizenship is in heaven.” (Philippians 3:20)

Not many of us have been citizens of another country. We do not know what it means to be thrust into a strange new place, a different culture, different traditions, a different language. The expectation is that you will immediately adjust to learn the new customs, traditions and language, that you will become like those around you – and yet, there may be a desire to retain some of what you brought with you – your own customs, some of your own traditions and values, to remember your native language and even pass it on to your children.

Comments of Janet, Ester or Yidaa:

It is not easy to be resident aliens – different from those around you – wanting to be part of this new society and yet always being a little bit different -- not totaling fitting in. One of the more interesting characteristics of many great people of faith, is the sense that they are aliens in their own land – resident aliens. It began with Abraham, who was called to be an alien in a foreign land. Without clarity about the future, Abraham is called to leave behind house and homeland to "go." Abraham moves away from what is familiar to take up a journey without even an identified destination. What Abraham does know about the future is reported in this today's Genesis reading: "[Y]our offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs, . . . more than that, the future is not pictured as all blessing . . .

They shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years, but. . . (and here is the hope) they shall come out with great possessions" (15:13-14).

It is a promise from God that Abraham and his descendents would have to remember and believe for 700 years before it would come true – 700 years – including 400 years of slavery in Egypt. How do you hold on to your traditions and believe God's promise for 700 years?

Then we have Paul's letter to the Philippians in which he reminds them, "Our citizenship is in heaven. . . and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. If Jesus was the first resident alien from heaven, then St. Paul understands that the followers of Jesus are in the same boat with him – the boat of the church. Maybe that is why it is so difficult for us Christians to be active within the church and active in the other areas of life outside the church. We have values, traditions and practices that just are not valued by those outside. We think it is important to worship on Sunday, but others don't – they'll open their stores, they'll schedule soccer and baseball and hockey practices – because, as Paul said 2000 years ago, "their god is the belly, . . . their minds are set on earthly things."

After all, if Jesus, the first citizen from heaven, encounters opposition and challenge from earthly opponents like Herod why wouldn't we? He told his disciples, "If anyone wants to be my disciple, take up your cross and follow me." You'll get opposition even for doing good things like going to worship, wanting to pray, or even helping others. If

you are an alien you are held in suspicion and every action can be questioned or challenged. And, don't expect support for your traditions. When you are a resident alien, you have to find ways to maintain the practices, traditions and values that are important to you without support from those on the outside.

When Paul talked about people in this world having their minds set on earthly things, he understood that that life in the world is always about someone or something that threatens this world's values being crucified. So if you are in your mid-50's or early 60's and make too much money, the company may re-organize you out of a job; if you aren't good in sports or too much a geek, you may be teased or become the object of cyber-bullying in school; and if you're considered too religious – you may find people avoiding you, or tempting you to compromise your values. Our desire to want to be part of the society in which we live makes us vulnerable to those temptations.

The battle being fought by the people of God in every age is between maintaining our calling as citizens of heaven, living on earth (resident aliens) and the tug of temptation to compromise our values in order to be accepted by those who only know earthly values. In a sense, the writer of Genesis, by recounting the story of Abraham, was encouraging Israelites, some living in exile, to be faithful. Jesus fought that battle throughout his earthly ministry, and St. Paul was fighting that battle in the letter to the Philippians. And in the 18th century, John Wesley took up the fight. This week, on March 2, we commemorate John Wesley who saw the need to renew the spiritual foundation of the Anglican Church. In 1738, while attending a Moravian meeting at Aldersgate St. in

London, he was moved by a reading of Martin Luther's introduction to the book of Romans, and felt heart strangely warmed.

It was the beginning of a revival in England that spread to the United States in which people were encouraged to accept that they were a child of God and to live out their heritage as God's child by loving God (showing a deep desire to please God in all that you do) and loving your neighbor (so that you would have a primary guiding regard for others and their welfare). This effort to live out the faith led to support for abolition of slavery and prison reform and helping the neglected and needy (In Luke's language, those who were being crucified?)

If earthly values crucify those who get in the way or want to change the order and value of life on earth, then the citizens of heaven see the presence of God in the world as bringing resurrection and life out of a death-focused world. For Wesley, the very places we are called to work are the broken places where God is bringing strength to the afflicted. This was not easy work. Wesley and those who followed him were denounced as promulgators of strange doctrines, fomenters of religious disturbances; as blind fanatics, leading people astray, and more. They were attacked by other clergy in print and attacked by mobs where they preached. And yet, their efforts as resident aliens in the land helped to renew the church.

I believe we need a Wesley-like mission for the church today. It is a call to be resident aliens in our land, with an emphasis on holiness of heart and life. It was God's purpose

when he first called Abraham, renewed through Moses, kept alive by the prophets; It was God's promise, fulfilled with the coming of Christ when the first resident of heaven came to earth, staking claim on the kingdom of this world as the kingdom of our God and of his Christ. It was St. Paul's clarion call to the Philippians, reminding them that they were citizens of that kingdom; and from Augustine to Luther to Wesley and Muhlenberg God has raised up renewers of the church. Again today, I believe God calls us to A Wesley-like mission. A life of personal and social holiness so that the love of God, flowing through us brings the love and new life which God alone can provide to those being crucified by the foxes of this world.

Amen.