

Sermons at Oak Grove

September 23, 2007

Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-19

"To Live the Passage"

By Andries J Coetzee

Opening Meditation: "City scene: riding a Chicago bus can have its grace-filled moments"

"SOMETIMES LIFE in a big city can feel impersonal, almost inhuman. On the streets the taxis vie for pole position at the stoplights and cut one another off to get to a fare. On the sidewalks people beg for money, holding signs that say things like "Homeless. Hungry. Help."

But sometimes the city feels so grace-filled it almost makes me weep. I often ride the bus from the church where I work on North Michigan Avenue in Chicago to the offices of the CENTURY on South Michigan. The bus takes twice as long as a cab, but it costs much less and almost always yields something interesting.

The other day I got on the No. 151 bus and started to read. At the next stop I watched as an elderly white woman boarded the bus and wasn't sure about how to use her transit card. She inserted it upside down, then backward. While the other passengers became increasingly distressed by the delay, the driver, a very pleasant African-American woman, patiently explained how to use the card. "Here, honey, let me do it for you," she said, leaning out of her seat, one hand on the wheel. The woman finally walked toward a seat but then turned back. "Are you sure it took only one fare from my card?" she asked the driver. "I heard it beep twice." "Yes, I'm sure," the driver answered. "But I heard it beep twice: it took two fares." "No, honey: it only took one fare. It always beeps twice." "How do you know?" the woman demanded. "Here, let me show you. Come on up here and look at the indicator. There it is, your one fare." By this time the stoplight had cycled from red to green twice. Finally we were under way.

At the stop after that a man in a motorized chair pulled the cord. He was frail, and one could see the tubes from the oxygen tank that was helping him breathe. "I'm on my way to the V.A. hospital and I'm going to need some help," he announced. Again the driver responded graciously. She helped him negotiate his motorized chair to the door, told

him how to position the chair for the mechanical lift, asked him to adjust the position an inch or two, and then activated the lift. The process took a long time. You could sense the tension and impatience of the people on the bus. The stoplight cycled a few more times and motorists honked. The driver, unfazed, remained infinitely patient. She was a note of grace on that busy urban thoroughfare. As I got off the bus, I thanked her for her kindness. "Just doing my job," she said. "You have a blessed day now, honey." (City scene: riding a Chicago bus can have its grace-filled moments By John M. Buchanan; *The Christian Century*, May 15, 2007: The Gale Group)

Scripture Reading: Hebrews 11: 1-3, 8-19

11 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ²Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. ³By 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. 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. 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. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. 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. 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.” 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, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. 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. By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, of whom he had been told, “It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you.” He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead—and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.

Sermon: “To Live the Passage”

When I read the story of our opening meditation by John Buchanan in the May issue of the *Christian Century*, it came to me at the right time in my life. About a month earlier we had come home with Alazar and Endalkachew from Ethiopia, and needless to say our lives were chaotic, turned upside down during that first month. Keeping up with our daytime work and trying to settle two energetic boys in the routine of our family, or was it changing our family routine to fit in with theirs or maybe a little bit of both, were two full time jobs. In some way this was more than Beth and I bargained for, between my youthfulness and her wisdom that comes with age.

It was in the midst of that chaos, that the bus driver held up an image of God, and reminded me who, we as Christians are called to be. This story helped me to stop, to slow down and to take a deep breath. It was then when I heard the words of Psalm 46 “Be still, and know that I am God”. Since reading this article I am trying to slow down and enjoy the here and the now with my family, as this is not going to last forever.

When I read the story I kept it to use as a sermon illustration for that first Sunday I was to preach after Pastor Mark and Carol left our community. Having gone through an “Interim Time”, or the time between pastors, before, I have experienced the good and the bad of it, like so many of you. The interim time is usually a time that brings about dismay, stirring a mixture of strong feelings and presenting a time of anxious uncertainty and even a sense of confusion. Or to use the imagery of our sermon illustration, it can so easily become a time of busyness, traffic, honking, people going back and forth, a time of impatience and tension. So often we miss the “grace filled moments” if we allow our “pet sins”, as our Interim Presbytery Exec put it last Sunday, to get the better of us.

And in all fairness, there are usually a lot of factors that distract us during this time of transitions, like impatient motorists honking at us while stopping at a traffic light to load and unload passengers, watching the stoplight cycle a few more times.

There are fears based on past interim experiences, and we read them into this situation. The unfortunate events of several years ago when both Associate Pastors had to leave

due to financial constraints, taking a number of members with them, are still so fresh in our memories. There are members who may think that I have to leave during this time of transition and that is not founded. Beth and I are committed to our ministry here with you at Oak Grove, and we are committed to this time, looking forward for an Interim Pastor to join us as Head of Staff. Now is not the time for fear of the unknown and the past to rule our hearts and decision-making.

I also think that the events that became known this past week can distract us in our calling, as we as a Session and a Congregation were shocked and disappointed to learn the news that one of our previous employees possibly embezzled money from Oak Grove. It is news like this that sometimes keeps us from seeing the bigger picture.

And this brings us to the wonderful opportunities that this time in our life together presents. The Interim Ministry can be a time of crucial significance in the life of a congregation and an opportunity for new ministries. Now is a time to take stock of ourselves, to assess our strengths and weaknesses, to refocus our sense of identity and mission, to try and understand our past and to move forward in new ways.

The immediate context of our Scripture reading of the day presents us with an option of how to greet this time of uncertainty in the life of Oak Grove. The famous statement in verse 1; “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” **is** set against the background of uncertainty and persecution of the first readers of the book. In chapter 10 (verses 32-33) the author reminded the people to whom he is writing that they were courageous in the early days after their conversion, when they faced trouble from the authorities, and now is a time for courage again.

Our reading then jumps to Abraham's example. It cites Abraham's willingness to set out for a land which God promised him, even though he had no idea what it was (11:8). This was an act of courage and risk. The Lord told Abraham to set out for an unnamed land where he and his family would dwell with God. Abraham immediately left his home and everything that was familiar, headed for this new land and wandered his whole life in search of it.

In his wanderings he was sustained only by the promise and by this longing for the land in which he would build a home in the presence of God. To be sure, there would be times in his wandering when Abraham would long to return to the place he had once called home, but now he was more powerfully drawn by a promise of a home he had not yet seen, a place where his heart, now restless, could find rest in its true home, in God. He was drawn, not by a memory anymore, but by a promise.

It is in the context of this passage, a time between the past and the future, that “The Passage Team” a task force of Session whose purpose it is to involve the congregation in a variety of ways to think about and plan for the future of Oak Grove, asked Gretchen Seale to design a logo, expressing our journey. On this journey there is no clear picture of what we as a church will look like, but we are sustained by a promise and a longing for a congregation that will embody the presence of God in new ways, to our community and beyond.

During this passage, there will be times in our wandering when we will long to return to the place we once shared, but now we are more powerfully drawn by a promise of a place we had not yet seen, a place where our heart, now restless, will find rest in its true home, in God. Now, we are no longer drawn by a memory, but by a promise.

The theologian, Alves, compares life on this journey between the past and the future as a dance, saying: “We may dance to the tune played by the present reality. Then our style of life will be realistic and pragmatic. Or we may choose to move our bodies under the spell of a mysterious tune and rhythm which comes from the world we do not see ...

Hope is hearing the melody of the future and **faith** is to dance it!

Dear brothers and sisters of Oak Grove Presbyterian Church, to continue this passage is worth the risk as the rhythm of the future contains promises of a new identity true to our present tense, more open to our surroundings, and new leadership to lead us in new directions.