

I'm ready... for what?

Sermon by Rev. Leah Fowler

August 6, 2016

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Luke 12:32-40

One of the best things I have found about this congregation is that we all come from so many different places. Some of you are from as near as down the street. Others of you have come from places that take over 20 hours by plane to travel to. No matter where you come from, you carry with you an early knowledge of things that make you feel safe, loved, comfortable and-- well-- at home. I want to invite you now to turn to a neighbor. Introduce yourself. Say where you came from. And then tell your neighbor something you are homesick for-- something you miss from an earlier home where you have lived.

I asked you to participate in this interactive task partly because I have come to realize that even though I am just about the newest part of this congregation, I am not the only person who does not know everyone. Some of us need more of a push than others to break the ice to get to know the person we are otherwise glad to worship beside-- especially since we come from so many wonderfully different places.

As the Olympics in Rio opened this weekend, the delegation that has moved me the most participates in its first Olympic Games: the team of refugees. Only 10 people, they come from Syria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, and Ethiopia, each now living in a host country as they try to put the pieces of their lives together. I imagine what they must be homesick for, as they have left what is known of their homes and schools, their foods and languages, their family treasures and artwork, and

most painfully, their family members and friends. Yesterday, Yusra Mardini, an 18-year old from Syria, represented the Refugee team in swimming. In interviews, Yusra shared the story of how violent her neighborhood had become in Syria, how two of her swimming friends had been killed. She told how her family gathered the money to pay smugglers to send Yusra and her sister with 18 other people on a small boat, meant for six, into the waters that would bring her to Greece. When the motor on the boat died and the boat started filling with water, Yusra and her sister chose to jump into the water to try to guide the boat to land rather than wait and see where the waters would toss them. She tells of making silly faces from the water to the terrified six year old boy in the boat, not wanting him to think about possibly dying.

The hope Yusra showed in her act of bravery shows more than a homesickness for what was lost; it also shows a homesickness for what could be-- most importantly, life, but also peace, stability, safety, and all the things that help one grow into the person God calls you to be. For most refugees, it is a long road to get there; the life-threatening process of arriving at a safer country is but one of many difficult steps. The international stage of the Olympics helps the world to join in the hope that these and other refugees might find that home for which they hope.

The anonymous author of Hebrews lists ancestors in the faith, including Abraham and Sarah, and tells of how they lived into God's promises, even when they would not live to see them into fruition. He describes them as "desiring a better country, that is, a heavenly one." Likewise, in Luke, Jesus promises followers that it is God's "good pleasure to give you the kingdom." These two passages lead us to feel homesick for something we have not *even* seen yet: the kingdom of God. Not knowing what exactly that is, we want it, we yearn for it, we wait for it, with faith in its goodness for us.

We live in anxious times. Those of us who have automatic news alerts on our phones half-expect each flash of breaking news to announce another mass killing. We know to look for the exit signs when we go to the movies or other gatherings with large crowds. The truth is, our world is not necessarily any more violent than it has been; but our constant feeding off of social media fuels our anxieties more than any point in history. Teenagers are particularly vulnerable to this! In addition to global vulnerabilities, the social ones typical of middle and high school have exponentially more ways to play out with the growth of apps that allow for gossip and cruelties, with no cutoff or accountability. Over my years working in youth ministry, I have seen growing numbers of teenagers resort to self-injury-- a way of physically representing the anxieties internally harbored. It is as if we do not know what we are waiting for, only that it will be *bad*. We rehearse our fears in our minds and on our bodies-- but what we are getting ready for is not the promises of Jesus.

“For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope” (Jeremiah 29:11). This quote from the prophet Jeremiah spoke to a people living in exile, a people without a home and without their jobs and often without hope. It gives people a roadmap toward something they have not yet seen but are told they can believe in.

While some look at mass protests such as the ones we have seen in the Black Lives Matter campaign, or Occupy Wall Street, and just see anger, I see hope. I see a homesickness for the country God wants for them, for us-- even though this country of equality, fairness and respect has yet been seen. I see that people still have the imagination to envision how things might be better, and imagination so stubborn that it will not allow the status quo to settle.

The poet Wendell Berry recommends the following as a practice of faith in things unseen:

Plant sequoias.

Say that your main crop is the forest
that you did not plant,
that you will not live to harvest.

Say that the leaves are harvested
when they have rotted into the mold.

Call that profit. Prophecy such returns. Put your faith in the two inches of
humus
that will build under the trees
every thousand years.

When we look to God's big picture as the product of our faith, rather than the comforts of the familiar or the immediate, we can see a history of God's faithful action through time, in our lives as well as in those who have gone before. Hebrews tells us how Abraham and Sarah followed in faith, forging a new relationship with a God who promised them a people and a land that they would not live to see. Even Sarah who famously laughed when she was told that God would provide her a son in her very old age conceived and bore a son, Isaac. Sarah and the number of biblical women who became mothers against the odds became my company, the saints with whom I prayed, when I had trouble getting pregnant years ago and was homesick for the child I had not yet met. Those prayers drew me back into a story that was larger and older than my own, and they reminded me that no matter how my story would shape out, I belong to a larger story of abundant faithfulness from which I could draw even when my own faith came up short.

Nadia Bolz-Weber, a Lutheran pastor who has lots of piercings and tattoos and is generally hipper than I will ever be, says that faith is not "given in sufficient quantity to individuals..it's given in sufficient quantity to communities." She gives the example of her congregation saying the Apostles' Creed in her church, called House for All Sinners and Saints.

Sometimes people tell her, “I can't say the Creed because I don't know if I believe every line in the Creed.” She responds, “I'm like, oh, my God. Nobody believes every line of the Creed. But in a room of people, in a room of people, for each line of the Creed, somebody believes it. So we're covered, right?” She continues: “this is Western individualism run amok in religion. It's not *your* creed. It's the church's creed...we've lost track of that in this personal me and Jesus, how *I* feel, what *my* piety is, *my* personal prayer life, all of that stuff, and we've lost the beauty of — this thing is really about community. It *always* has been the *body* of Christ.”¹

For a church that is in an interim period, this is really good news. This church belongs to a larger body that has been doing this for millennia: going through change and looking toward God, getting ready for what might become, believing that while change is rarely easy, Christ is at work in making all things new. Some of you may feel homesick for what has passed, with good reason; this church has been blessed with a rich history, some wonderful leadership, and a sharp witness. It is worth honoring where this church has been. But we can also be homesick for what we do not yet know: for the people and the church God will call us to be.

Stay connected to the person you shared with at the beginning of the sermon. While you have shared one thing you have left behind that you are homesick for, consider that person and others you have not yet met as part of a roadmap toward the treasure this church will become as we follow, with faithfulness, into God's future. Amen.

¹ Nadia Bolz-Weber, “Seeing the Underside and Seeing God: Tattoos, Tradition, and Grace” interview for *On Being with Krista Tippett*, National Public Radio October 23, 2014