

Today's climactic reading from Hebrews reminds me of St. Augustine's famous line from his autobiography, *Confessions*: "You have made us for yourself, and **our hearts are restless, until they can find rest in you.**" As limited as we human beings are, we have our home in the eternal One, and we can't be at rest until we find that home. The author of Hebrews, as I said last week, is addressing a weary, wavering community that is no longer sure of their commitment. They weren't being persecuted in a grand, throw-them-to-the-lions, systematic way. It's more that their neighbors were wearing them down. When people became Christians they stopped offering sacrifices to the civic gods, and to the rest of the neighborhood that looked like an invitation for the gods to bring down mayhem and disaster on everybody, so they could be pretty hard on Christians. The people for whom Hebrews is written are tired and discouraged—sick and tired of being sick and tired.

So the writer bucks them up by reminding them that they were preceded by a long line of spiritual pilgrims who "died in faith without having received the promises." Abraham and Sarah set out to an unknown land on the promise of as many descendants as stars in the sky, and never saw all those descendants, but "from a distance they saw and greeted them." The writer says, "They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, . . . but as it is, they desire a better country." They were restless, and they wandered and felt like strangers in this life, tired and discouraged often enough.

On Tuesday, Charity Nebbe interviewed Liz ____? The author of a new book about spiritual wandering. In 2016 her marriage broke up and she left her church, and the thesis of her book is that this is a moment in which that kind of loss is typical, and she wants to know more about it. What are we looking for, spiritual pilgrims today? She traveled around the

Midwest and studied churches and people on spiritual quests, and what I took away from listening to the interview was her conclusion that Americans are in spiritual crisis, that we won't "rest" until we have stopped and taken the time to listen to all the voices that make us uncomfortable, and sat with the discomfort long enough to figure out what our role is in it. I may be misconstruing her message, but I only heard the interview while driving so we'll just hope the Holy Spirit is guiding my recall. I was struck by her appreciation for church *and* her clear-eyed assessment that church is often not what it should or could be. We long for home, but we don't quite see how to get there.

"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." The author of Hebrews, remember, is trying to encourage their people, to let them know that just because you don't see it, or you don't see the way there, it's nevertheless real and present. The "real world" is made visible by those who are drawn into the heart of God by the divine work of faith in them.

During the long years of the movement to abolish slavery, some people thought that once the slaves were freed they should be taken back to Africa. Some black Americans agreed, which is how the nation of Liberia came to be. But many did not, as the following hymn,

"Colored Man's Opinion of Colonisation," written in 1842, attests:

Great God, if the humble and weak are as dear
To thy love as the proud, to thy children give ear!
Our brethren would drive us in deserts to roam,
Forgive them, O Father, and keep us at home.
Home, home, sweet, sweet home!
We know no other; this, this, is our home.

<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/african/images/picknick.jpg>

The hymn goes on to cite the fact that relatives are now buried here, and that law and

education in the US offer opportunities to natives, which is what they are. The writer refers to America as “land of our birthright”—the atrocity of slavery brought their forebears here, but God’s Providence is for these black Americans, who now claim their right to remain and benefit from America’s riches.

It’s helpful to see how others have discerned the gifts of God in a bleak landscape in which things hoped for are unseen. In a book called *American Lazarus*, about Native American and African American religious literature, Joanna Brooks takes a close look at an 18th century black evangelist named Joseph Marrant who ministered to ex-slaves in Nova Scotia. She points out that Africans on the North American continent didn’t inherit or pick up the Europeans’ founding myths about America being the “new Eden” or a city set on a hill by God’s providence. They had come together as a consequence of barbarity, and as an expression of supernatural faith.ⁱ This is what we learn from Joseph Marrant’s journal that is a consciously crafted account of what he sees as a covenant community struggling to realize its prophetic destiny.

How does Joseph Marrant think about this covenant community? Not as the new Eden, as I said, or by another of the archetypes used by Europeans. He reveals themes in the community’s covenant with God like separation and reunion, “falling out” and revival, death and resurrection. Calling on African traditions of the trickster figure and the Biblical story of Lazarus, Marrant tells his community that they have been chosen by God to outlive catastrophe as a witness to God’s power overruling the worldly, the rational, and the natural. “It is a story that honors experiences of alienation, displacement, and loss even as it counters normalized assumptions about subjective control, coherence, and continuity.”

How’s that for the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen?

How's that for acknowledging that we are strangers and foreigners on the earth, *and* that we are confident of attaining the city, the home, that God has prepared for us? And Joseph Marrant wasn't wrong. That *is* what the Lazarus story is about—that as real as displacement and loss are, God's grace and power are greater. The resurrection you long for is real.

I'm interested in Liz ??? analysis that we are longing for sacred experience that will elude us until we have a greater reckoning among Christians about our failure to take seriously or listen to the voices that make us uncomfortable. I think she's talking about the evangelical community she came out of, but it's a good reminder that discomfort can teach any of us about realities we'd like to ignore. The underlying connection she makes is that community is the vehicle by which we come to experience the sacred, or through which we cultivate the ability to experience the sacred, so what she's really saying is that insofar as Christians try to suppress discomfort, we hit a dead end on our pilgrimage to the homeland that we yearn for. Joseph Marrant, on the other hand, tells his *community* that the very discomfort that they have inherited is in fact their pathway to the city of God.

“You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

That's the testimony of one of the many in the cloud of witnesses surrounding us, who know themselves to be strangers and sojourners on this earth but also citizens of God's realm, which becomes visible to us as we experience discomfort and even despair together and let God show us how it can be transformative.

ⁱ Brooks, J. (2003). *American Lazarus: Religion and the Rise of African American and Native American Literatures*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.