

NO LASTING CITY  
Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church  
Columbia, Tennessee  
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Hebrews 13:10-15

Let's play a little imagination game today. Imagine that this week you got a notice that you are going to have to move to a new town—I mean a really new town, someplace totally unfamiliar to you: Carefree, Arizona, population 986; or Delight, Arkansas, 431 souls; or Happy Camp, California, where 1110 people reside. Those all sound like nice places, but they're not home.

You get to your new place just as school is starting, and decide to go watch the local high school football team. But the team colors are strange, and the cheerleaders bring you no cheer, and instead of the friends and neighbors you are accustomed to seeing at the game, you find yourself adrift in a sea of strangers.

You get sick, and need a doctor. But who to call? Look in the Yellow Pages? Back home your doctor called you by your first name. But now everything is new.

Sunday comes, and you want to go to church. Is there a Presbyterian church in this town? You finally locate the place. What time is worship? Where do I park? Where do I enter? Where do I sit so that I'm not taking somebody else's place? Back home you never gave those questions a second thought. But now everything is new.

For some of you in this room, this is no imaginary exercise, but something that has actually happened to you, as you were told that you were going to move to a place you had never heard of before called Columbia, Tennessee.

Whether it is something you have actually done, or whether this is just something to imagine, we all know that going permanently to a strange and unfamiliar place is scary. It's a lot more fun to be among familiar faces and familiar places, where the druggist and the laundry clerk know you by name, and neighbors talk over the back fence.

People who are settled have always had an advantage over people who wander. It's so much more comfortable to feel that you belong than to be an outsider. "They're different," we say. "They don't understand how we do things. . . . They'd be better off going back where they came from." That's how settled people have always felt about strangers, wanderers, newcomers. They're weird; they're different.

There are people who are settled, and people who are wanderers. Jesus was a wanderer. "Foxes have holes," he said, "and the birds of the air have their nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."<sup>1</sup> He could have decided not to be a wanderer. Jesus could have set himself up as the resident miracle worker of Capernaum, the guru of Galilee. People would have flocked to him from all over. He could have married and settled down and lived to be 83 years old and received all sorts of tributes in the paper when he died.<sup>2</sup>

But he didn't do that. He became a wanderer, an itinerant, identifying himself with the nameless ones who don't quite belong because they have nowhere to call home. Jesus made himself homeless and a wanderer.

That is how he lived, and that is how he died. "Jesus suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood." As the old hymn puts it: "There is a green hill far away, outside a city wall."<sup>3</sup> Jesus died outside the city, away from the decent people, away from those who belong.

The book of Hebrews compares the treatment of Jesus with the way the carcasses of animals were treated after they had been offered in a religious sacrifice. They are unclean! Get them away! Burn them up! Even the one doing the burning was required to wash his clothes before he could enter the city again.<sup>4</sup>

That's what they did with Jesus. Away with him! Crucify him! He has defiled us! They "excommunicated" Jesus.<sup>5</sup> Jesus died on the trash heap because they considered him trash. The one who knew no sin became sin for us.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 8:20.

<sup>2</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperCollins 1994), p. 92.

<sup>3</sup> *The Hymnbook* (1955), #202.

<sup>4</sup> Leviticus 16:27.

<sup>5</sup> Clarence Jordan, *The Cotton Patch Version of Hebrews and the General Epistles*, p. 42.

If you seek Jesus, look for him not among the settled ones, the ones with nice homes and nice cars and nice lives. Look for Jesus among the wanderers, the ones who don't belong, the excommunicated ones, the outcast ones. That's where we will find Jesus our Lord.

The book of Hebrews takes another step. If that is where Jesus is, out among the outcasts, then that is where we must be, too. "Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured."

It is not the choice we would make for our lives. We don't want to be outsiders. We want to belong, to be established, to be settled and secure. That is what the people who built the tower of Babel wanted. "Let us build a city with a tower in the center." They were going to do it on their own, thank you very much, with no help from God. They were going to make their own lives settled and secure. But God came down to see this grand work, and confused their languages, so that those who wanted to be settled were scattered, and "they left off building the city."

The problem with this earthly life is that all our attempts to make it secure and settled on our own terms will ultimately come to grief. That will happen because "here we have no lasting city." Despite our efforts to secure our lives, we are all wayfarers, passing for a time through this world. Life has a way of disrupting our attempts to make things secure.

I have a preacher friend who worked for a time in one of the staff positions at the Presbyterian offices in Louisville. He and his wife loved their life there. They found the home they wanted, and got it fixed up just the way they wanted. Life was good. And then the word came: Your position is being eliminated; you've got to move.

Many of you know the First Presbyterian Church of Fayetteville, Tennessee, just about an hour from here. It's a lovely church, right in the downtown area of Fayetteville. If you go to worship there, you will find the following notation in the church bulletin:

In 1832, a building for the church was erected on this site. Nineteen years later, this building was destroyed by a cyclone. The event is recorded in the Minutes of the church Session in these words: "February 24, 1851, between the hours of four and five o'clock, it pleased the Almighty to loose the winds of heaven, and our church was crushed to its foundations. The dismembered fragments remind us that we have no abiding city here below."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Thanks to Fayetteville pastor Todd Jenkins.

There is great wisdom in the book of Hebrews when it calls us to another whole way, the way of Jesus. Instead of putting too much of our energy into making this life perfect, we look to the life to come. “Here we have no lasting city; we seek one to come.” We can get our homes decorated so that they would be a fitting candidate for *Architectural Digest*, and have lawns that look like golf courses. We can be secure with our investments. We can enjoy settled routines where everyone knows us. But beware of getting too settled in this life. It will come to an end.

The world says: “Put down roots.” Our faith says: “Keep your bags packed.” You never know when the old certainties of this life will be disrupted. We are a pilgrim people, following a Lord who was not settled in life or in death, but who was a wanderer.

So Jesus says: “In my Father’s house are many mansions. I go to prepare a place for you.”<sup>7</sup> The apostle Paul says it this way: “We know that if this earthly tent we live in is destroyed [we might better say *when* it is destroyed], we have a building from God, a house not made with hands.”<sup>8</sup>

An old 2<sup>nd</sup> century Christian writing called “The Epistle to Diognetus” puts it in words that still apply to us:

Christians cannot be distinguished from the rest of humankind by country or language or customs. Yet although they live in Greek and barbarian cities, and follow the customs of that city, at the same time they live in a totally different way. They live in their own countries, but only as sojourners; they bear their share of all things as citizens, but they endure hardships as foreigners. Every foreign land is their fatherland, and yet for them every fatherland is a foreign land. They exist on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven.<sup>9</sup>

Here we have no lasting city, but we seek one to come. What about me? Am I too invested in the things of this world, spending too much of my time and energy and money on my earthly home? Do I work too hard to make life secure on my own terms, like the builders of the tower of Babel tried to do?

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<sup>7</sup> John 14:2-3.

<sup>8</sup> II Corinthians 5:1.

<sup>9</sup> Anne Fremantle, ed., *A Treasury of Early Christianity* (New York: Mentor Books 1953), p. 48.

What about you? What shells are you called to break out of? What old patterns of living have you trapped? Maybe it's time to divest yourselves of old things, old possessions, old patterns of living, old attempts to shore up your life. Maybe it's time to travel light, and follow Jesus the wanderer.

Maybe it's time to get to know the wanderers, the nameless faceless ones who don't belong who don't know where to sleep at night, who don't have a group to sit with at the school cafeteria, who don't know the names of anyone in church. We go to them, because that's what Jesus did. He went outside the camp. He became a wanderer.

Therefore, let us go to him outside the camp, and bear the abuse he suffered. It may not sound like good news, but in the end it is. We don't have to prove anything to anyone. We don't have to provide for our own security. We don't have constantly to be trying to be in the in group. Because none of that is finally what is important. What is important is following the way of Jesus, who suffered outside the walls for us. For here we have no lasting city. We seek the city which is to come.✠