

VISION SUNDAY 2007

The Architect and Builder of the Church

TEXT: HEBREWS 11:8-16 (ESV)



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Oak Hills
Presbyterian Church,
Overland Park,
Kansas

Desiring God Most:

"If we consider the unblushing promises of reward... in the Gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."—C.S. Lewis. We come to Vision Sunday to talk about what we want as a church—what we want the church to be, how we hope to grow and deepen in

our ability to minister in this community. And our prayer is that we would not be too easily pleased, but filled with a desire for glorious things—deep, rich, strong desire that God would move among us, grow us, bless us and use us to bless others. As this church gets older, there are milestones we'll hit—and things we'll come to want more and more. But it can be so tempting to let our desires remain too weak—to have our desires stop with earthly things—to want things apart from wanting God most. This morning, I want to explore what it means to desire God most—to prize the unblushing promises of the Gospel above all else. And to do that, we turn back to the life of Abraham. Like us, he was a wanderer. But he was seeking something... a city... And more specifically, home.

Hebrews 11:8-16

⁸By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise.

¹⁰For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.

¹²Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.

¹³These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. ¹⁴For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

Oak Hills' Vision for a Building:

Perhaps one of the greatest desires we'll face as we grow is some kind of a building to call home. If you're new here or even if you've been here for a while you may wonder about our plans for a permanent facility. We don't really talk much from the pulpit about the future of Oak Hills when it comes to building, so I thought I'd take a moment to address it today. The reason we've said little is because there's little to say. We have a building fund that we designate a portion of the tithes and offerings to every month, but it is modest, and nowhere close to a down payment, let alone the purchase price of a building.

We are committed to being in central Overland Park—close to the highway for easy access for those coming from places like Lee's Summit, Edwardsville and North Kansas City. When you look at the placement of the other PCA churches in this region, they form a horseshoe perimeter around us on the east, south and west of Overland Park—so we're not in a position to purchase land on the outskirts of town and someday move out to the edge. We want to be good neighbors to our sister churches, and we also want to remain a regional church that draws from all parts of the city. Central Overland Park is a strategic location for that with I-435 and I-35 intersecting here.

This puts us then in an area that is almost completely developed already, and the land and buildings that do exist come at a premium price. Add to that how we've grown in such a way that we'd require something much larger than a "starter church" that would hold 150 or so. As we've grown over the years, the Lord has blessed us by giving us a large church family. A permanent facility—one that we'd own—would need to be big enough to hold us and allow for growth. So entering into a plan to buy something must be well thought through, something we become convinced is God's will for us. It would require some sort of large financial influx just to make a down payment.

This is to say nothing of what kind of facility it would be. When you think of a church, some think of steeples and pews; others, perhaps, a contemporary structure with an internet café. The reality is there are as many different ideas of what a permanent home for Oak Hills could be as there are people thinking about it. And none of them are likely spot-on. Churches are getting creative—some building traditional structures, others renovating strip malls and everything in between and beyond. Some have a sanctuary one place, offices and fellowship hall in another, depending on what they can afford in their target zone.

We have taken a step in recent months in response to our own growing facility needs. The lease for the office we were using was coming due at the same time we were feeling the need to have a place where groups could meet and host some kind of childcare at the same time. So we began looking for space that would have office space for the staff as well as two or three good sized meeting rooms. What we found was just that place—offices for the staff, a large meeting room in front and a very kid-friendly large room in the back—set up for child-care. We also have a separate conference room that can double as an infant nursery for bible studies and other kinds of meetings.

We made this move because many church events that were hosted in homes were simply growing too large. (*The women's Bible study would have over 45 people in one home!*) So we have this space available to the church as we continue to grow. And we want you to use it. We've got a two year lease with the option for another three on top of that. The leadership talks regularly about our facility needs, and we look forward to what the Lord has for us, but we are in no hurry here.

It is at this point some might expect me to take a "but the glass is half full and we still have lots to be thankful for" turn—as if the thing to do now is give a pep talk to hold us over until the bricks and mortar at last complete us and make us **REAL**. But such a desire would be far too weak. We should want far more than that! We should want all that the Gospel promises for the people of God. We should want to be all that He has called us to be. We should desire what Abraham had his eye fixed on—not a building, but a **CITY** whose architect and builder is God!

Wanderers On Purpose:

Hebrews 11 illustrates what it means to want God most. Abraham lived on his father's land in his father's country until the Lord called him to "go to the land I will show you." The call was nebulous in its detail, but clear to Abraham in its origin. **It was God's call.** And it was ultimately so much more than a call to own land. It was God's call—and God's call on the lives of His people ultimately is to Himself. He was calling Abraham to take him and his people as His own—that God would be his God and Abraham and his descendants would be God's people.

So Abraham set out west, not knowing where he was going. And in so doing, he established one of the best images of what it means to follow God in this world—as strangers in a strange land. Meister Eckhart said it this way: "*God is at home, we are in the far country.*" We know in hindsight there was a promised land that Abraham's descendants would take as an inheritance, but Abraham wouldn't even get that detail until several hundred miles into his journey at Haran. And even once he saw the tangible Promised Land, he himself would never possess it. His whole life from the day he obeyed God's call to go out into the world was one of nomadic wandering, living in tents along with his wife, with their foreign clothes, mannerisms and accents.

Add to this the fact that God's entire promise rested on His faithfulness to the generations that would come from Abraham and his wife—yet they were barren. They had put all their eggs in one basket—that God would show Himself faithful and would hold up His end of the Covenant He had cut with Abraham—to be his God and to take Abraham's people as His own. And He did, giving them an heir, Isaac, in their old age. But then our text takes up someplace beyond parcels of land and bricks and mortar. Abraham, throughout all his wanderings as a foreigner, we're told, was looking forward to a "*city that has a foundation whose architect and builder is God.*" (vs. 10)

It is here where the church today joins the wanderings of the patriarchs. Vs. 13 tells us Abraham, Sarah, and before them Noah, Enoch and Abel, all "*died in faith—not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on this earth. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had the opportunity to return.*" (vs. 13-15) But they desired a better country—a heavenly one. They desired a home in the kingdom and presence of God.

They were "**wanderers on purpose.**" They lived as nomads because their hope was not complete this side of heaven. They wanted a city more glorious than any they encountered of bricks and mortar. Their faith was in something so rich, so glorious, and so imperishable. Their faith was in the fact that God was taking a people for Himself not merely where they live now, but where **HE** lives and reigns forever. That is what they wanted, and in the mean time, they went where God led them.

Of Whom God Is Not Ashamed:

Verse 16 is utterly breathtaking. It tells us that when we understand the seriousness of His promise to take us as His people and want that more than anything, "*God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.*" What an amazing statement—that God is not ashamed to take us as His own. We're all people who make a mess of things this side of heaven. We sin by ignorance of what is holy and right, and deliberately with full knowledge of what is holy and right.

Four times our text says the patriarchs sought a better country. (vs. 10, 14 twice, 16) By recognizing they were aliens in a foreign land, they were confessing their hope for Home. In other words, because what they wanted more than earthly wealth was God, God was not ashamed to be called their God. It would disgrace His name to call Him God while loving other gods before Him. But when He is all we want, when the name our lips confess Him as is "*Our God!*", He is not ashamed to receive that confession. And not only that, there is a future city He is building for us where we'll be home, back from the far country, in His presence for all eternity. This life will have been a vapor.

The danger for us is not that our desire for a permanent home would be too great, but that it would be too weak! In the eternal history of this church, there will be no mention of steel and land. Only the people and how we lived as wanderers on purpose this side of Glory will be worth telling. The opposite of being ashamed is being pleased. This is God's promise to those who pine for Him alone as we follow His lead on this earth—that we would one day be brought home to hear Him say, "*Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.*" (Mt 25:34)

Jesus tells us how to live as a people who long for our eternal home—by loving and caring for the lost and exiled in our midst: "*I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.*" (Mt 25:35-36) I don't know what the Lord has for Oak Hills—what ministries will develop, what bricks and mortar are in our future, which people will come to be part of what makes up this local church.

Here's what I do know. We have a call to bear witness to Christ, making disciples of all the nations. (Acts 1:8, Mt 28:19) So far its taken some of us to the Yakama Indians, others to Ethiopia, others to Ecuador, others to the house across the cul-de-sac. And we should expect this will only continue. But as we look ahead to what God has for us, may our dreams never be set merely on worldly accoutrements, even if, Lord willing, we have many. Instead, may our strong desire this year and beyond be for the City He is preparing whose primary and most precious feature is that God is there with us, His people, forever! Until then, may we wander well—looking to love the lost and show them the way to the city that awaits the people of God.