

## **“Homecoming”**

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*<sup>16</sup> This is the covenant that I will make with them. After these days, says the Lord, I will place my laws in their hearts and write them on their minds. <sup>17</sup> And I won't remember their sins and their lawless behavior anymore...*

*<sup>19</sup> Brothers and sisters, we have confidence that we can enter the holy of holies by means of Jesus' blood, <sup>20</sup> through a new and living way that he opened up for us through the curtain, which is his body, <sup>21</sup> and we have a great high priest over God's house.*

*<sup>22</sup> Therefore, let's draw near with a genuine heart with the certainty that our faith gives us, since our hearts are sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies are washed with pure water. <sup>23</sup> Let's hold on to the confession of our hope without wavering, because the one who made the promises is reliable. <sup>24</sup> And let us consider each other carefully for the purpose of sparking love and good deeds.*

*<sup>25</sup> Don't stop meeting together with other believers, which some people have gotten into the habit of doing. Instead, encourage each other, especially as you see the day drawing near. (Hebrews 10:16-25, CEB)*

In my home state of North Carolina, many churches hold fast to an annual tradition. Each year, usually in the late summer or early fall, they observe “Homecoming Sunday.” Many of these gatherings date back to the colonial era, and they serve several important purposes. First and foremost, it is a reunion and nostalgia – a chance for people who remember and cherish their history in a congregation travel back to reconnect with people who loved them and shaped them. Naturally, these are times for thanksgiving – a time to express gratitude to God and one another for shared experiences, shared faith, and shared stories.<sup>1</sup> And last, but certainly not least, it is a time to eat. Even now, the words “Dinner on the Grounds” bring back glorious memories of sliced watermelon, deviled eggs, candied yams, honey-baked ham, homemade biscuits, and gallons of sweet tea. In the church of my youth, Homecoming Sunday was the Superbowl of potluck suppers.

This week, as I thought back on those happy days, I was reminded of a lesson I once shared by my childhood pastor Joe Mullin. He was going into a hospital to visit a parishioner, and as he came through the revolving door in the lobby, another man was leaving on the opposite side of that door. And in that moment, as they passed through the door, their eyes met and they recognized each other as friendly acquaintances. As Dr. Mullin waved through the glass partition, the other man, who was genial doctor in town, called out, “Hey, preacher, what do ya know... for sure?”

The man didn't stick around for an answer. Nor would anyone expect him to. It was just an affable greeting, something warm and friendly to say to a friend in passing. Truth be told he was probably exhausted, ready to get some sleep after a long shift in the hospital. That's the way life unfolds, right? Many, perhaps most, of our moments feel like revolving doors, and most of our interactions amount to quick hellos that we toss out on the way to somewhere else. But there was something deeper in this particular exchange. Just below the surface was a profound question, an earnest inquiry posed by a man of science to a man of faith. That deeper question lodged in Dr. Mullins' heart, to the point that, sometime later, he sat down to try and write out an answer. There are many things we think we know about our world, he thought, but at the end of the day, what do I know **for sure**?

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<sup>1</sup>“Church Homecomings,” <https://www.ncpedia.org/church-homecomings#:~:text=A%20number%20of%20churches%20use,dedication%20of%20a%20new%20building>.



Interestingly, when he shared these reflections, he had already been retired for years. And from that vantage point, looking back on his long and eventful life, he arrived at three things he would say he knew for sure.

Number one: **Life is Short.** "It's very brief," he said, "compared to life that has been on this planet, and we are just passing through. We are just guests here." And our occupancy, in the grand scheme of things, is but a blink in the vastness of time.

The second thing he knew for sure: **Death is Certain.** We need not linger on this one. I think we can all agree that, for humans, this one has been scientifically proven.

And the third thing he knew for sure was this: **God Keeps His Promises.** He cited two promises in particular. The first was from Matthew: when Jesus says, "*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest... you will find rest for your souls.*" Whatever we have to carry, God will help us carry it. And the second promise was from John: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places... And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also." When the end comes, God will be with us, and we will be with God.

Those were the three things Dr. Mullin said he knew for sure. The first two are pretty ironclad. Some may say the third is less certain. How do we know that God's promises will all come to fruition? How can we be sure that God can help us with every burden? And the big one: how can we be sure that there is a room for us, a dwelling place for us, with God in heaven? The third one seems beyond the scope of the scientific method. And yet it was very clear, listening to Dr. Mullin speak, that his 88 years of living had been more than enough to give him certainty that the third and final assertion was true – that God really does keep his promises. He was completely at peace with that conclusion... completely confident in that affirmation.

That, my friends, is what I hear in this passage from Hebrews. As I mentioned last week, the letter to the Hebrews was written to a religious community that was slipping a bit. People were getting lost in a world that was complex and confusing, and for a variety of reasons they were no longer certain of things they had once believed, and this letter was meant to remind them of things that they seemed to have forgotten – remind them of how they felt when they were young in the faith... remind them of a time when they had passion and conviction. It was an encouragement for them to remember and reclaim what had always been theirs. Just look at the words that the letter uses: covenant... confidence... genuine heart... certainty... reliability. Why do we have such confidence in God's promises? the letter asks. "*Because the one who made the promises is reliable.*"

And what does the letter prescribe to help the people maintain this confidence and assurance? It is simple really. The letter calls the people who have been wandering to **come home**. Do not do what everyone else seems to be doing, the letter says. Do not follow the well-worn worldly path that neglects the sacred ties of the church and the solid foundation of the body of Christ. Do not stop meeting together. Do just the opposite: gather together regularly; pray together, regularly; serve people in need regularly; value one another, love one another, encourage one another regularly. In a nutshell, be the church on a regular basis. "*Do not stop meeting together with other believers, which some people have gotten into the habit of doing. Instead, encourage each other, especially as you see the day drawing near.*"

Summer tends to bring a sense of freedom and adventure, and many of us had time to travel and explore some amazing places around the world. But I for one am very happy to be in this place, today, with all of you. We may not have used the specific term to describe this day, but trust me... for us, here and now, this is Homecoming Sunday. Lots of people may have gotten out of the habit of gathering with other believers, but here we are, being the church together. And that is no small

thing in these lives we lead, lives that often feel like revolving doors that never stop spinning. This is no small accomplishment in a world that seems to be slipping... a world that is complex and confusing. And it is more important than ever, if we find ourselves no longer certain of things we once believed... no longer as connected to a passion we once felt. When we start feeling like that, it means it is time to come back home to the people who know us best. We often think of the church as if it were a building built with hands, but our spiritual home is not a pile of stones and sticks. Our true spiritual home is found in the people who have gathered here and continue to gather here... people who share a sacred history, a shared sense of grace and gratitude, and shared stories that remind us of who we are, who we always have been.

When we come home to the church, we have the chance to stop the revolving door for a few sacred moments, and we have an opportunity to do more than toss hurried greetings to one another on the way to somewhere else. Where else in this life can you be regularly reminded of what is most important in this world... reassured about things that are lasting, things that are eternal, things that we can rely upon.

Hey, church... what do you know, for sure? Yes, life is short and death is certain. But we also know that God keeps his promises. We have confidence that the people of God's church are the ones we can count on to help us carry our heaviest burdens. And we are assured that, here with God and the people of God, we will always have a home.

Thanks be to God. ***Amen.***