

Title: Which way are you looking?

Key verse: Hebrews 11:15-16

“If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.”

Introduction:

Good morning everyone! Happy Valentine’s Day to you all. As we celebrate love today, it is only fitting that we gather to worship God.

Romans 5:8 says:

“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

1 John 4:10 says:

“This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”

verse **19** says, **“We love because he first loved us.”**

So, with that in mind, my Valentine message to you today is from **Ephesians 3:16-19:**

“I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have the power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”

So, again, Happy Valentine’s Day to you all.

It’s a blessing to worship God with you today. I have to admit I was a little nervous about my message last week. When I heard Brother Dan Parry give his message, I thought, “That sounds a lot like what I was planning to speak about.” When I mentioned this to Yukako, she said, “If God is asking Dan to speak about something pastor Dan just spoke about, and then He is asking you to speak about it, too, He must really want us to listen to something.”

So, today’s message will be a follow-up of sorts to last week.

Pastor Dan spoke about storing up our treasures in Heaven. That where our treasure is, our hearts will be also. Brother Dan Parry spoke about looking forward to the rewards in Heaven. It seems to me that God has been asking us to look forward. My message is also about looking forward, in a sense, but in order to put a bit of a spin on it, I have decided to pose it as a question. Which way are you looking? The Bible is actually full of stories about looking back. Looking back is not necessarily a bad thing. Looking back can teach us many things, but it is very important HOW we look at the past. I believe this is why God may be trying to draw our eyes forward, in order to draw us away from the temptations most people face when they look back. Today, I would like to look at some of those temptations. To help us out, I will use some people from the Bible.

Let's start with Lot's wife. To set the context, Abraham was praying on behalf of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, which were steeped in wickedness, that God would not destroy them. The Lord sent two angels to the cities to see if their wickedness was really so awful, and to look for any righteous men that might still be in those cities. Lot welcomed these angels into his house, but the city's men wanted to violate the angels and demanded that Lot bring them out of his house. The angels protected Lot and then told him to flee the city with his family because God would surely destroy it for its wickedness.

Let's read **Genesis 19:15-17; 23-26**

"With the coming of dawn, the angels urged Lot saying, "Hurry! Take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or you will be swept away when the city is punished." When he hesitated, the men grasped his hand and the hands of his wife and of his two daughters and led them safely out of the city, for the Lord was merciful to them. As soon as they had brought them out, one of them said, "Flee for your lives! Don't look back, and don't stop anywhere in the plain! Flee to the mountains or you will be swept away!"

"By the time Lot reached Zoar, the sun had risen over the land. Then the Lord rained down sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah—from the Lord out of the heavens. Thus he overthrew those cities and the entire plain, including all those living in the cities—and also the vegetation in the land. But Lot's wife looked back, and she became a pillar of salt."

Why did Lot's wife look back?

We read this story and shake our heads at Lot's wife. Imagine yourself being ushered by angels out of your home, told that your city would be destroyed by God and that you are not to look back, but flee for your life! Would you be able to do it? Perhaps Osaka or Kyoto doesn't really conjure up the image of total wickedness that we think of when we talk about Sodom or Gomorrah, but that is exactly my point.

I am reading a great book by C.S. Lewis called "The Four Loves", and he talks about one love—affection—and how it colors our day to day life. It is not a love that develops out of choice. We choose our friends, so Lewis claims that Friendship or *Philia*, is different from affection. Affection can be a wonderful thing- drawing together people who are least likely to be friends. We can become attached to Mr. So-and-So just because he is always there. We feel affection for the people we meet at the Family Mart every day, the people we see on Sunday at OIC, and even our own family—because we all know that we don't choose our family, and yet we love them. Affection is broad and the least picky of the "loves" because it overlooks a number of flaws and finds something good for goodness's sake. But that in and of itself does not make it Godly love. He wrote about our ability to "love" or develop a liking or affection for things other than people. The love of home, "of the place we grew up in or the places, perhaps many, which have been our homes; and of all the places fairly near these and fairly like them; love of old acquaintances, of familiar sights, sounds, and smells." I believe that Lot's wife simply loved her home. She could not look forward because she was too attached to the familiar sights, smells, and day to day life she had known. Was the city wicked? Yes. But she was willing to look past the

wickedness for the sake of what was comfortable and familiar. Both Lot and his wife were hesitant to leave, but Lot followed the angels' advice and didn't look back. His wife couldn't look forward. That, I believe is the first temptation we must keep in check. When we are finding ourselves hesitant to move forward, even with God's leading, is it because we are too attached to what's familiar? If that familiar thing is wicked beyond belief, are we not being led by God to flee for our lives, never to look back?

The angels led them by the hands away from the city, as it says in verse 16, because the Lord was merciful to them. God did not want them to stay and be destroyed. God wanted them to give up their familiar life and move on to something holier and better. I believe God wants the same for us. If you are lacking the courage to step away from something that you know God is leading you away from, remember this verse:

1 Timothy 6:11-12

“But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses.”

The second example I would like to look at is actually the entire Israelite community in the desert. **Exodus 16:1-3**

“The whole Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the Desert of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had come out of Egypt. In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.”

It was the fifteenth day of the second month after they had miraculously escaped from Egypt. This whole community had passed through the Red Sea on dry ground and watched Pharaoh's army drown before their very eyes. Yet less than two full months have passed before they started to complain.

God had performed some pretty impressive miracles. He had poured out ten plagues on Egypt and spared the Israelites from those plagues. He had freed them from cruel slavery. All of this could be understandably confusing to the Israelites if they had been flying blind, so to speak. If they had just been following Moses blindly with no purpose or promise ahead. They might not have understood why they left Egypt. But that is not the case.

Exodus 6:6-8

“Therefore, say to the Israelites: ‘I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. And I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I will give it to you as a possession. I am the Lord.’”

Now, God had already come through on most of those promises.

Free from Egyptians? Check.

No longer slaves? Check.

Redeemed with an outstretched arm? Check.

Mighty acts of judgment? Ten plagues- Check.

Bring you to the land I swore to give Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob- not yet. They were in transit.

Yet, instead of looking at all the fulfilled promises, all the mighty acts of the Lord, where did the Israelites look?

Egypt. At the first trace of hunger or thirst, they grumbled. They remembered pots of meat. They remembered full bellies. They did not remember their slave labor or the sweat and tears they spent serving the Egyptians. They did not remember being spared from 10 hideous plagues. They did not remember walking across the Red Sea on dry ground.

Do we do the same thing? Do we leave out those details that are inconvenient and repaint a picture of our past that is prettier and more satisfying than it really was? When we look back, what parts of what we left behind do we look at? If the Israelites looked back and said, "Wow, I am sure glad we left slavery behind us," then I am sure they would not have remembered those pots of meat so fondly. When we look back, do we see God's mighty acts of redemption that brought us to where we are? If so, then we are not likely to grumble when our present situation is uncomfortable. We see the checklist of fulfilled promises and know that the other promises are just ahead. The way we look back changes how we look forward to what is ahead.

I have my times, living here in Japan, when I get "homesick". I start to think of my friends and family back home. I think of Indiana's beautiful fall colors, food at Thanksgiving, hot apple cider with cinnamon sticks, playing football in the backyard, sleeping on a bed, indoor heating, driving on open highways with my window down and singing at the top of my lungs.

When I get into these little slumps, I have found a verse that really snaps me back into focus.

It's in Hebrews 11. Hebrews 11 is the famous faith chapter. We get our definition of faith, verse 1: **"Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."**

We get a hall of fame of faith. Notice Lot's wife is not in it. The Israelites as a people are only listed when they passed through the Red Sea on dry ground and when Jericho's walls fell after they marched around the city for seven days. That grumbling time in the desert did not make the list, either.

But what catches my attention about the other people of faith is that they were all looking forward to something far beyond what they would see accomplished in their lifetimes, and yet they so lived with faith their entire lives that we also can be inspired to do the same.

Let's read.

Hebrews 11:13-16.

"All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had

left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.”

When I think back to life in Indiana, I also realize that there is very little to stop me from just buying a plane ticket, punking out, and going home. It is as simple as going to the travel agent and laying down the cash. But when I think of that, it just doesn't make sense. After all God has done to bring me here, after all the promises he has shown me, after all of his faithfulness, the deep desire he has placed in my heart to live here and share God's word in Japan, and an endless list of provisions and protections- it just doesn't make sense to go back. When I think of what I left behind, I remember Jesus' promise in Luke 18.

Luke 18:29-30

“I tell you the truth,” Jesus said to them, “no one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life.”

In conclusion, I would just like to encourage you, if you seem to be having some difficulty in looking forward, to look at what may be holding you back.

Are you afraid of leaving what is familiar? Look at God's mercy- He is leading you on to better things.

Is your memory of history a bit fuzzy? Have you been painting glorious pictures of Egypt? Try remembering God's mighty acts of redemption. Try remembering what God has saved you from. Try remembering God's promises already fulfilled. Then look forward to those promises yet to come because Jesus is coming back. That may help draw your eyes forward. Amen?

Hebrews 12:1-3

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him, endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

Let us pray!