

## The World We Live In

How many people here this morning believe in aliens? Do you think we have been visited by creatures from outer space, by people who don't belong here and who threaten our way of life?

There are two parts to the answer to this question: part A is, "Yes, there are aliens on this planet who don't belong here and who threaten the way of life of the general populace, and, part B, "You are them!"

Let's start today with Hebrews 11, the "Hall of Faith" as some have called it. In the early verses the writer commends those who believe in a Creator, then Abel for his faith, then Enoch for his, then Noah and then Abraham as men who acted on faith. I want to read to you from v. 13:

*All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised, they only saw them and 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.*

Now, let's turn to 1 Peter 2:11:

*Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day He visits us.*

What do we learn from these two passages? First, we learn that there are people who once lived on the earth who didn't feel totally at home here. They were, according to the writer of Hebrews, "looking for a country of their own." There was lots of room in the Middle East during the days of Abel and Enoch and Noah and Abraham, but it wasn't room they were looking for -- it was a different kind of place. It wasn't that the earth didn't provide them with food, that it didn't offer them shelter or pleasant experiences, it is that this wasn't God's home. He who once walked with Adam and Eve in the garden was now seemingly distant and there were some people who longed for His presence to be restored to them. They weren't satisfied with the fulfilment of shallow desires -- they longed for the Creator more than His Creation and felt that they weren't fully at home.

The second passage asks us to imitate these pioneers of faith and to live as aliens and strangers in the world. Specifically, it tells us to do so by refusing to gratify those desires that lead us into sin, that lead us away from our close fellowship with God, and that substitute what the world considers valuable for what God has called truly precious.

There is another sense in which the word "alien" appears in the New Testament. This sense occurs when the word 'alien' describes our former relationship with God, the standing we once had with God before we embraced the sacrifice of Jesus on our

behalf. Let's look at two texts:

*Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now He has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death, to present you holy in His sight, without blemish and free from accusation . . . (Col. 1:21,22)*

And from Ephesians 2:19

*You are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone.*

That's quite a contrast!

In two passages we see that our old way of life alienated us from God. We were enemies of His in our minds because we chose evil behaviors, ungodly, self-centred, rebellious actions. We were once considered foreigners, aliens, people who didn't belong in the same conversation as the people of God. But now we are both reconciled to God and firmly affixed to the people of God. We are seen as holy in the sight of God Himself and we are being built together with other believers on the foundation of apostles and prophets with Christ our cornerstone.

It's a black and white picture. We were once out there, cut off, no status, "illegal aliens" we'd be called today. But now we are part of the building, accepted, appreciated, included and valued. Once aliens, now family. Once wandering nomads, now part of the very structure of the church.

But is that your experience? Is that my experience? Do we really feel like aliens in the world or is the world our real home? Are we so comfortable with the values of the world that the values of the Kingdom seem jarring, too dogmatic, too inflexible? Today I want you to see the world we live in and the values it advertises . . . and then look back again at the values of God's Kingdom. I'm going to do this through a series of pictures, talking about each one for a little bit and then moving on to the next one.

First picture: This is a protest in London, England against the Roman Catholic Church and its alleged cover-up of sexual abuse perpetrated by its priests. The banner in the bottom right says "London for a Secular Europe" and other protests have been more specifically targeted at religion-based laws, particularly the idea of Sharia law in England. But what caught my eye was the sign in the center: "Time for God to step down". That's a picture of our time, all over the Western world, "It's time. We don't want God talked about in the public forum and we don't want to live our lives in any reference to God. We are here on our own. We don't believe that God created us -- we believe that Darwin did, or that at least he showed us where we came from, and so we want nothing to do with a God we don't believe in." That's the effect of years, several generations, now, of the hammering of Darwinian evolution in schools and in media and in the courts. The foundation of Western society has been undermined to the point where it is no longer relevant to lawmakers or to society at large, except for its historical role in providing the basis for the laws by which we are governed.

What does that leave? What happens when you shake off your Christian history and embrace “secularism”, “life without God”, the new humanism? What takes God’s place in the minds and hearts of ordinary citizens?

The first thing is that you have to repudiate your past by getting rid of all symbols of the faith on which our nations were founded. On Christmas Eve we were greeted with a Google Doodle which was a simple scene of three bare trees in a snowy field with a horsedrawn sleigh riding through in the front. If you clicked on the doodle you were greeted with this message from Google: “Happy Holidays” Google Doodle: Search giant wishes you a merry nondenominational festive period (NOT Christmas). The American Civil Liberties Union has won a decision in federal court that demands removal of a 29’ high cross on the site of a Korean War veterans’ memorial near San Diego, pending appeal. These are commonplace events in our day -- you’ve all heard of things like this, including getting rid of the symbols of Christmas from public areas.

The second thing is that you embrace a world without God, without truth, without ideals and values that are not subject to a vote, not subject to popular opinion, not changing because the media wants it changed or the new lot of politicians says it must be. You embrace this world because you believe that we can do a better job of understanding and dealing with human problems than God did and because we want to be totally free from the constraints of morality, of a code of ethics that demands more than the law does.

The third thing that happens is that everything becomes believable and that something becomes an object of worship. As to the first point, C.S. Lewis once said that when a person no longer believes in God, it’s not that he won’t believe anything, but that he’ll believe everything. And that’s what happens when you remove Scripture as the source of truth -- then suddenly there is no sinful nature to worry about, just things like poverty or a lack of education that get blamed for all wrongs in our society. We can deal with those things and not have to worry about dealing with sin in us. Truth becomes less important than a political agenda, which we’ve seen over and over again in the social battles of the last four decades, from abortion to gay rights to euthanasia -- the goal is all that matters and truth is mostly kept away from the public eye.

As to something being an object of worship, here are a few quick samples:

- people worship celebrities - politicians, athletes, motion picture stars.
  - people worship power, and even if they only have a little bit of power, they will be tempted to use it for their own gain or to punish people out of spite. And those with a lot of power will certainly abuse it, by depriving people of their rights, their freedom, their opportunities, their dignity.
  - people will worship pleasure
  - people will worship money, and the things they can gain or do with money
- There are many others, but if you think of worship as giving one thing the highest value in your life, of living to gain that thing or to imitate that life, then you see how status, power, pleasure and money meet those criteria, as do other things

That's a quick snapshot of a world which has rejected God, which has said, "Time for God to step down".

Second picture: 5 teenage girls stand together without any interaction with each other. There are no words spoken, no eye contact, no touch -- just the little screen and the little keyboard to text with. Technology has taken us to places we could hardly imagine a couple of decades ago and it will continue to fascinate and absorb. But the wonders of technological discoveries mask the relational poverty of our day. I don't mean that having a smart phone makes you relationally poor -- I mean that being absorbed with the internet or with electronic gadgets can mask the reality of relational poverty in a person's life.

Reliable statistics are hard to come by, but there are many anecdotes of relational poverty, including heartbreaking stories of people so obsessed with what they can view on the internet that they lose intimacy with their spouse. They prefer to be stimulated by erotic images on a screen instead of the wonderful intimacy God intended for marriage, which is painful for both husband and wife.

In that case the technology obviously helps create the relationship breakdown. In other cases the influence of technology is more subtle. For example, the tendency to label people who have different values from your own gains acceptance among a group of people more quickly because of the influence of Twitter or even Facebook. In Mark Driscoll's recent book A Call to Resurgence, he writes that women in the city of Seattle are referring to women in the suburbs as "breeders" instead of "mothers". They have taken their own choice to not bear children and, as if to defend it, use a put-down term to describe those who have made a different choice. It's mean-spirited and it's intended to be hurtful and it's a sign of our times.

And that kind of language becomes included in a tweet or an instagram or a facebook post and others with a similar lack of love and respect can pick up on it quickly and pass it on. By the way, in place of motherhood, people have taken to babying their pets. Seattle's homes are populated by cats, dogs and children, in that order, and you can see adults pushing strollers around Green Lake Park with their pets inside.

There are enormous flashing red lights that scream at us that our relationships are in trouble, that the culture is not healthy, that hatred and intimidation are the preferred means of political action and that gaining control of one's own life -- and of the lives of others -- is the path to success and to power.

Picture #3: Government overreach. The picture on your screen paints an American picture. Under the caption, "If you build anything, they will come", are men with uniforms from Internal Revenue, the Department of Justice, the Securities and Exchange Commission, the Federal Drug Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency. The principle applies everywhere. Do you want to renovate your home? Do you want to run a small business? Do you want to cut down a tree in your yard? Do you want to have a family member live in a suite in your home? Do you want to have a shower where the water comes with force? Do you want to buy a

lawnmower that doesn't get bogged down in the grass? Do you want a detergent that actually cleans your clothes? Do you want to kill the weeds that grow in your lawn? The government has something to say about all of those things, rules that govern them -- sometimes pages of rules -- and they all have the effect of making your life more restricted, more stressful, less satisfying. That's the whole reason for governments at all levels - to regulate, to restrict and to control. We are becoming more and more restricted and more controlled with every passing year.

Picture #4: Big governments use big issues to increase their controls over the population. Many governments have been using the threat of climate change to raise tax revenues and to get people's attention away from other things they are doing. The bottom line: people get all stirred up about issues like pipelines and the threats they supposedly present to the environment and no one thinks about the alternative: rail cars which have a track record of providing 3 times the oil spills that pipelines do, without including the tragic oil tanker disaster in Quebec this year.

When the climate change issue came under closer examination and became less promotable, other issues rose up to take its place. In the U.S., Obamacare has captured the headlines and the anger of millions who cannot renew under their old plan despite promises that they could. It is a "controlling" piece of legislation and has many aspects to it that go beyond simple health care, but its unpopularity has made it necessary for politicians to start beating another drum: income inequality, the growing gap between the incomes of the very rich and the rest of us. Watch in the coming year for more legislation that will attempt to deal with this topic.

Picture #5: When Rome burned during the reign of Nero, in 64 A.D., the emperor looked for a scapegoat and he began to attack Christians. There are some echoes of that scapegoating during the past few years. We'll look at this issue in more detail in March, but it's another picture of our times. Christians are understood as people who believe something, who say there is truth in the world and who promote the idea that we should all live under that truth -- this is dangerous. Sometimes Christians have said these things in stupid, obnoxious ways -- which does nothing to help the cause of Christ in the world. But sometimes we just happen to hold different beliefs than those in positions of influence and power and we may be scapegoated because we hold those beliefs.

I was struck earlier this month by a verse from 2 John:

*May grace, mercy and peace, which come from God our Father and from Jesus Christ His Son, be with us who live in truth and love.*

That was written in a world of absolute Roman dominion and the attendant suffering and lack of freedoms that went with Roman rule. It was written to a people who were alien to the prevailing culture of Rome and who lived in ways that were diametrically opposed to the values of that culture. It was written to a people who would understand that to live in truth and love was to live contrary to the spirit of the age.

In the passages we began with, we saw that people of faith saw themselves as

aliens and strangers on this earth. They knew that they didn't share the values of their culture, that they were different, that they had another and better home prepared for them by Jesus Himself. They stood apart from some of the practices of their culture simply because they wanted to honour Jesus with their moral choices. They stood apart because they loved Jesus and had been filled by His Spirit. They stood apart because the new life, the life of God's Kingdom, was at work within them and was setting them apart for their eternal destiny with God in heaven. Will you and I stand apart from the values of our world in order to bring glory and honour to Jesus?

I have talked about some of the trends in our culture today because I believe that we will have to make choices again and again that will either turn us against our culture, against the values of our time, or will make us irrelevant to the brokenness of our world. We will either stand for something that is different or we will lose our ability to offer any hope at all. We will offer hope that is based on truth or we will merge completely with the faith of our culture, which is the hope that things will get better someday, that we can overcome evil on our own and that nothing really bad could ever happen here. Are any of those three things true? Well, if you don't believe in truth, it doesn't really matter, does it?

Let's embrace who we really are and live for the glory of the One who made us and who redeemed us. Let's enter 2014 with a greater attachment to Him who has loved us than we have to the world that hates us. Let's not worry that we don't fit in really well here, but fix our focus onto how well we will fit into the Kingdom of our God. A new year awaits us -- a year of undoubted challenge. I encourage you to meet that challenge by living in truth and love -- and then to you be grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and from Jesus Christ His Son.