

## **Living Where You're At**

### **Opening and Prayer**

Greetings, in the name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. May God's grace and peace be with us all.

Before I start my sermon, I just have a small change to make. I named my sermon on Tuesday, "Seeking a Homeland," but as I thought about it throughout the week, I realized it needed a different title. So if you want, you can go ahead and cross that title out. There are pencils in your pews, if you like. My sermon today is called, "Living where you're at."

And now, let us pray:

Thank you for the gift of life. Thank you for the sun and rain that nourish life, for birdsong and flowers that express life with such beauty. Thank you for the lives of those we remember. And thank you for the gift of new life. You, O Lord, are the author and perfecter of all life.

To you, O God, I dedicate all my speaking this morning. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

### **Introduction**

Well, it's good to be back from vacation. I didn't go anywhere this year. Instead, we stayed around Edmonton, and we welcomed a baby girl into our lives. Simone Jael Guenther Trautwein.

I spent most of my time working on little projects around the house. We had little plants growing in our eavestroughs, so I had to clean those out. It's been raining so much, that anytime it stops for 24 hours I have to mow the grass.

And then of course we had people coming to visit. Sherri's parents were up right after Simone was born, and then my mom came down for a few days. Then Sherri's sister and her family stayed with us for a few days.

The birth of a baby really brings family together!

I remember it being a little different when Arthur was born.

### **Taking a Risk**

Yes, we had family come to visit, but we lived much farther away from them. When Arthur was born, we lived in a two-bedroom apartment in Kitchener, ON. It was a decent place for two grad students. But when we found out we were expecting a child, we started looking around. We applied to live in some co-ops in the city, and then we

waited for a unit to come available. We waited, and waited. And then we got a call, I think it was in November, saying that two units were coming available, one on January 1<sup>st</sup>, and the other on February 1<sup>st</sup>.

Arthur was due mid-January, so what were we to do? We decided that moving right after Christmas while Sherri was still pregnant probably wasn't a good idea. What would we do if she went into labour on New Year's eve?

So we decided to move for February 1<sup>st</sup>. That meant that, for the first weeks of Arthur's life, we would also be trying to pack up our apartment, and I still had to work at my job. Like Abraham and Sarah, we set out for a new place. But unlike them, we knew where we were going. Sherri's parents flew out to help us, and we had good friends to help us along the way.

We got settled into the co-op, and life was good. We had a tidy little yard, with a clothes-line and a flower garden with hostas and lilys growing effortlessly, like you don't see in Alberta, and a manitoba maple growing in the corner. We began to settle down and settle in. But before long, when Arthur was about 4 or 5 months old, we saw an advertisement in the Canadian Mennonite for a job here at LMBC.

My family was all here, in the Edmonton area, and Sherri's family was in Saskatchewan. Living here would mean driving distance, instead of flying distance. Could this really work out? Could we really move to Edmonton? So we took a risk. We applied for the job.

### **Settling In**

But at the same time, we had just moved. The co-op we moved into was a little different than living in an apartment or a condominium. There was an expectation that you would really get to know your neighbours. There was a playground at the centre, and people with and without kids would gather there to talk and laugh and play. They had a monthly community supper – bbq in the summer, potlucks in the winter.

And because it was a co-op, there were lots of committees to be on, and not enough volunteers. There were gossips and busy-bodies. People who thought they were in charge, and others who wanted to be. And some people who were just plain irritating, but were part of the community. Sherri and I joked that it was just like church for people who don't go to church.

So we lived in this co-op, and we were getting settled in, but at the same time we knew that we had applied for a job across the country.

### **Keeping Quiet**

At first, I didn't tell even my closest friends that we'd applied. When we first moved to

Kitchener, I was there to start a grad program. I didn't expect to be there more than 2, maybe 3, years. And so at first, when we made friends, there was always a tentativeness to the relationship. Everyone knew that we weren't staying, so what was the point of really getting to know each other? But slowly, after five and six years, those barriers were coming down. We weren't sure ourselves, anymore, whether we were leaving. When Arthur was born, we decided that we needed to either put down roots and commit to the place we were in, or get back to the West. Our lives with our friends were becoming more and more entwined, and if we stayed any longer, it would just be too painful to leave.

So I didn't tell anybody that we had applied for the job. No use starting to disconnect if we weren't even going to get the job. But then in the summer, when Arthur was about 6 months old, we came back to Edmonton to visit family, and we checked out the church, and it seemed like a place we could fit. And then in the fall we met with Carol as she was preparing to move here herself. And then in the winter you invited us to candidate, and in the spring we came out for the interview. Finally, we had to tell people that we were considering leaving.

### **Looking For a Better Country**

As Abraham and Sarah prepared to leave their home, I wonder what kinds of emotions they felt?

Our scripture reading from the book of Hebrews this morning tells us that they were called to set out for a place, but it doesn't say how they heard that call. Did a wise guru, maybe a priest or a trusted friend, give them a word from the Lord? Did they just get a sense, while they were praying and worshiping one day, that this was what they should do? They didn't have the Bible yet. Was there an economic incentive? Maybe Abraham couldn't find a job. Was the city of Ur getting too crowded? It seems that they left the city to become wandering shepherds and ranchers. Were they early adopters of the "back to the land" movement?

Were their friends and family sad to see them go? "What's wrong with living here?" they might have asked. "You've got a life here. Sure, it's not as great as you would like. But seriously, living in tents with sheep and goats? Is that really better?"

People can feel betrayed when you leave them. "What's wrong with this city? I live here. It's good enough for me. Isn't it good enough for you? Do you think you're better than us? Were you ever really my friend, or were you just making do until you could get somewhere else?" It can be hard for those who are left behind to understand why you need to go, even if they're happy for you.

Abraham and Sarah and their children left the city of Ur to go to a strange land because

of a promise, and they kept that promise in mind even as they faced difficulty. The book of Hebrews says that, “if they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return.” But they didn’t. They desired a “better country.” A “heavenly” country.

### **One Foot Out the Door**

I’ve got a secret to tell you this morning: I’m not really at home here. I’ve got one foot out the door. No, I’m not looking for a job at another church or anything like that. I love this community. I’m talking about Edmonton, Canada, the whole World. I don’t really feel like this is my home. So I’m looking for a better country, a heavenly one.

And just like when I moved from Waterloo to here, I’m not always sure who to tell about it. People don’t always get it.

Don’t you love this world? Look at the great things we’ve got. We’ve got the Internet and modern Medicine. We’ve got beautiful works of art and we’ve built amazing buildings. The people in this world are just the best! There’s a blog called, “Humans of New York,” and it’s full of stories about truly amazing and inspiring people, living ordinary lives. We’ve got entertainment. We’ve got pleasure and convenience. Why would you want to go and live in a tent?

Yes, there are some problems. Some people have enough to eat, and others don’t. Some people live free from the fear of violence, and others have to navigate violence every day. We’re kind of wrecking our environment. The things some people have to do to make money are just... dehumanizing. And others are in slavery. These are some problems, but that’s the price you have to pay for living in this world that, otherwise, is pretty amazing!

Or maybe... Do you think you’re better than us? Isn’t this world good enough for you?

How do you build friendships and relationships with people if they know that this isn’t really your home, that you’re looking to live somewhere else?

### **Living Where You’re At**

When Sherri and I moved to the co-op, we had a question. Do we engage, knowing that we might leave soon? Or should we not engage? What would happen if we ended up staying there for 5 more years, and hadn’t engaged with the place?

After talking about it for a while, we decided that it is important to live where you’re at. This phrase became really important to me then. Living where you’re at meant joining a committee at the co-op, instead of asking, “is this worth it? What if we move soon?”

Living where you're at meant going deeper into relationships with friends, even when it meant acknowledging and trying to resolve conflict. It was tempting to say, "hey, we're moving soon. That person doesn't really matter. Let's just stop dealing with them." But in that year and a half, we really tried to enter into those relationships.

Living where you're at meant that, when some friends wanted to start a house church, we joined with them to imagine what it would look like, even though we knew that we might never see what it became.

And in some ways, that last year-and-a-half was the most fruitful and enduring year we lived in Waterloo. Maybe it was just because we had a new baby, and all of life seemed magical. But I don't think so. I was supporting our family working at a job I didn't love, and trying to finish up my thesis, which I was starting to hate. I didn't really have time to join a committee at the co-op or engage in conflict resolution. Why did I do these things?

I think I did them because I was seeking a better country. A heavenly country. A homeland.

And what I discovered along the way is that the home I'm looking for is not a place that I can move to. It is a city that God is building. But God isn't building this city in the sky. That's not what a heavenly city means. God is building this city on earth, in the small places and the abandoned places. In the cracked streets and the desert wastes. In the places where you're worn out and stretched thin. Where you've lost patience, or your heart is broken. That's where God is building the heavenly city. And God has invited each of us to help build that city.

### **Conclusion**

If we are seeking a homeland, we might need to leave our homes. We might need to leave the glittering facades. We need to leave the "good enough" attitude. The dull comfort of predictability.

For me, looking for a better place meant engaging with the place I was in. Living where I was at. It involved a kind of leaving. A disconnecting from my routines. But also a letting go of my security. For years, we had been keeping people at a little bit of distance, so looking for a better place meant letting people in.

I've learned that living where you're at is what you do while you wait for a better country. And, at the same time, living where you're at is how we participate with God to build that heavenly city.

This week, as you go back into the world, what is the better place that you are looking for? What is the new land that God is calling you to?

Are you at home in this world? Maybe God is calling you to leave it.

Are you floating adrift? Maybe God is calling you to leave your wandering, to settle down and live where you're at.

Wherever it is you're going, know that, just like Abraham and Sarah, God has promised you a better country. Indeed, as Hebrews tells us, God has prepared a city for you.  
Amen.