

People What to Know - Sermon Series for Lent

VI. "What About Heaven?"

Text: I Corinthians 15:50-56; Revelation 21:1-2

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*And the one who was seated on the throne said,
"See, I am making all things new..." Revelation 21:5*

It was once customary for preachers to address "The Four Last Things" as the subjects of their sermons during the season of Advent, that liturgical season that leads up to Christmas, the four last things being death, judgment, hell and heaven. (1) In this Lenten series of sermons leading up to Easter at Morningside, we are tackling a series of questions that arise from our attempt to understand the resurrection faith we profess as followers of Christ. Today, we ask a question that is appropriate for any season of the year – What about heaven?

20th century theologian Paul Tillich wrote, "The most important thing is not that people go more to church, listen to evangelists and join (congregations). The most important thing is that the younger generation asks the right questions. . . about the meaning of life, the conflicts of our existence, the ways to deal with anxiety." (2)

What happens to us when we die? The answer to that question is one of the most important ways we address our existential anxiety. We mortal human beings live lives that inevitably come to an end. When those who we hold dear come to the end of their lives, we wonder what is next for them. Young, old, somewhere in between, we want to know what will happen to us when we die – what is next for us. Christian theology has been accused of answering questions no one cares even to ask, but I am confident that today's question will pass through just about everyone's mind sooner or later, for all of us will face what poet Alan Seeger called "our rendezvous with death."

The Psalmist wrote, "The days of our lives are 70 years, or perhaps 80, and if we are strong, even then, their span is only toil and trouble, they soon are gone, and we fly away." (Psalm 90) We live in a time of expanded life expectancy, when we can look forward to living, on average, longer than the generations before us lived, but the truth is that one day, our lives on earth will end. To be human is to have limits. Only God will live forever.

Someone once reassured the comedian Woody Allen that he would achieve immortality through his comic art. Woody Allen replied, “I do not want to achieve immortality through my art. I want to achieve immortality by not dying.”

So, what does the Christian faith have to say about where we go when we die? Reinhold Niebuhr wisely warned against describing “the furniture of heaven and the temperature of hell”. It is also wise to avoid the temptation to make Christianity all about heaven, as if it were an other worldly religion, as if all that really mattered was to get through this earthly veil as quickly as we can, so that we can spend eternity where we’re supposed to spend eternity. That kind of other worldly religion forgets that it was into this world that Jesus came and for this world that he gave his life on the cross.

The book of Revelation does not depict individuals being lifted up off the earth and transported by golden chariot to the gates of heaven. On the contrary, Revelation offers a magnificent vision of the end of time as the culmination of history – “And then I saw a new heaven and a new earth,” John writes. “For the first heaven and the first earth have passed away, and the sea was no more.” The world, the good world that came into being through God’s love, is finally and completely redeemed. Heaven and earth become one; the heavenly city descends to the renewed earth. We are given the magnificent message that the home of God – the home of God, the dwelling place of God is among mortals, and God will dwell with us forever. This is not a picture of human beings in isolated heavenly splendor. This is a picture of ultimate community, community with God and community with other human beings, not a heavenly oasis, away from other people, but a heavenly city. What an important reminder that learning to live with other people in the here and now is one very important way we prepare for heaven. (3) Being connected is not just a matter of this life; God created us for community forever.

Throughout its history, Christianity has tended to spiritualize the promises of Jesus and the writings of the New Testament and to look to heaven as an escape from what I once heard a radio preacher call “this wicked, wicked world.” Too often, the church has been so fixated on personal salvation that it turned its back on human suffering. It failed to respond to the sick and needy and closed its eyes to injustice, all because this world was considered just a prelude. African American theologian Michael Battle has lamented, “Christians are sometimes seen as heavenly minded people with no earthly use.” There is one thing heaven is not. It is not an escape from this world.

Our scriptures give us maddeningly few details about heaven and the few that we have tend toward ornate imagery and symbolic language. There is a heavy concentration, especially in the book of Revelation, on the decorative arts, so to speak – walls made out of jasper, gates made of pearl, and yes, streets paved

with gold. Sounds like a place Tammy Fay Baker, Lord rest her soul, would have loved to spend eternity. My tastes are more in the Arts and Crafts line.

In his excellent book, *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*, Peter Gomes offers a helpful perspective on why we shouldn't get too hung up on the specifics of heaven. He writes, "The future God has prepared for us is literally beyond our imagination..." Some of us try. John of Patmos used his imagination; people are always writing books using their imaginations, but for now, "heaven is only a thing of the imagination, for no one has gone there and come back to tell us about it." (5)

The apostle Paul earlier said this very thing: Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into human heart the things which God has prepared for those who love him."(I Corinthians 2:9)

Is heaven a place, as human beings understand place? I don't know. "Lo, I tell you a mystery," Paul wrote. (I Corinthians 15:51) What I know is that heaven is a state of being, and in the scriptures, heaven is understood at least metaphorically, if not literally, as the place where God dwells. The Biblical definition of heaven is that place, that reality that is filled from top to bottom, with the glory of God. The glory of God is manifested everywhere.

In Revelation, John tries to capture this mystery by its coattail when he writes, "The city has no need of sun or moon to shine, for it is the glory of God that is its light. And its lamp is the Lamb." (Revelation 21: 23) Darkness, even the darkness of death itself, is overwhelmed by glorious light because of the Lamb, the Christ, who has taken away the sins of the world.

What will heaven be like? Heaven will be filled with the glory of God. Heaven will be the completion of God's good creation, the completion of our mortal existence. Our mortality will take on immortality, through the power of God, not through our own power. Our existence after death is not because our spirits continue to live. When we die, we die. But through the power of the resurrection, we are born again.

What will we look like? I don't know. I know that Jesus' disciples recognized him when he returned after his resurrection. I know that Jesus said to Thomas, "Put your hand in my hand; touch the wound where the nail went into my hand." But I also know that as John tells the story, Jesus was able to walk through a locked door. We will be like the way we are, and we will be profoundly unlike the way we are. *I tell you a mystery.*

Heaven will be living in the company of God and in community with other people, this time without all that interferes with living life at its fullest and robs it of its joy. Tears will be gone; death will be no more; crying and pain will be no more. My father died when I was a relatively young adult. I imagine, and I hope, that he and

I will be able to be together, forever, without all the tension and sadness and brokenness that marked our relationship while he was on earth. How will it happen? I don't know. I tell you, it's a mystery...on which I base my life and my hope.

I do not believe you have to wait until you get to heaven to experience it. I believe that every time that you and I become reconciled to an enemy, that's a heavenly thing. We enter it right here on earth when we work for reconciliation, when we work for life and stand against death, when we bear witness to the presence of God by offering ourselves as a source of healing, healing in our families, healing in our nation, healing among nations. We do it by forgiving and allowing ourselves to be forgiven. We do it by simple acts of kindness and humanity. We do it by putting a roof on a Habitat House.

A friend of mine tells of going to the Post Office one day to mail a letter. He and the lady behind the counter were the only people in sight. "I guess you don't have many customers today," he said.

"I've got you, don't I?" the lady said.

We might not be great shakes, you and I, great in number, rich in resources, but God has us to be agents of heaven in the here and now.

I know there are people who get downright gleeful over the prospects that they will spend eternity upstairs, if you will, and that a lot of other people will be relegated to the basement, where the fiery furnaces burn night and day. I'll never forget riding down a road in Mississippi where I saw painted on the roof of a barn these words: Smile! Our God Is a Consuming Fire! I think we'll let Chris preach next year on hell. What I want to say today is that we best be careful when we claim to know the heart and mind of God, whose thoughts are not our thoughts and whose ways are not our ways. We probably will be very surprised to discover the company God keeps in heaven. John Newton, who wrote *Amazing Grace* and who was himself one who struggled with sin and salvation in a very existential way, wrote, "When I get to heaven I will see three wonders there. The first will be to see the people whom I hadn't expected to see. The second will be to miss many of the people I did expect to see. And the third and greatest wonder will be to find myself there." (6) The amazing grace of God. So much greater than the grace and generosity even the most gracious and generous mortal has ever possessed.

I suppose the question I am asked most often as a minister is whether or not I believe people who are not baptized as Christians are going to heaven. When that happens, I recall how Diana Eck, the distinguished professor of comparative religion at Harvard, answered a similar question. She was asked, "Give me a quick yes or no. Is Christ the only way to salvation?"

Dr. Eck answered, "I am only a professor at Harvard. I will leave the question of salvation up to God." (7)

When I joined the church, and again when I was ordained as a deacon and then as an elder and finally as a minister of Word and Sacrament, I professed my faith, which still stands strong, that I believe that Jesus Christ is the way to salvation. I acknowledge him to be Lord of all.

I've also read the Bible, and I have read those unsettling passages there that have to do with the judgment of the Lord and the judgment that God renders, not against the unbaptized, but against those who fail to give drink to the thirsty, and food to the hungry, and clothing to the naked. (Matthew 25) I read about the rich man who feasted everyday at his table and gave crumbs to the poor man at the gate, and how they both died, and how the rich man, who in his earthly life had cared not for the suffering of his fellow man, found the tables reversed. He lay in torment, while the poor man was treated like royalty in the high heavenly places. Clearly, how we treat other people is of eternal importance to God. To live in our own little worlds, with no concern for anyone else, is to relegate yourself to a place far away from God. That is a working definition of hell for me, by the way. Hell is that place that is far away from the presence of God.

The stories of judgment the Bible tells are put there to shake us up, to wake us up, to wise us up about the possibility of repentance and taking the road that leads to God's new creation. You here today who are young, pay attention to how you are putting your own life together. Are there things that break your heart, and if so are they always all about you? Now would be a good time to understand your role in the world, which is to serve others, even as Christ came to serve. Older people are in even greater danger of self-absorption than the young, I think. *Oh, my aching back. Oh, my creaky knees.* Absorbed by our own needs is not a heavenly way to live. The sturdy promise of God's eternal presence ought to be motivation enough to make us get over ourselves. To not be afraid, whether we live or whether we die. Jesus said, "In my father's house are many dwelling places. I go there to prepare a place for you, and if I go and prepare a place for you I will return and take you unto myself, that where I am, there you will be also." (John 14: 2-3) What more do you need to live a life that is loving and full and absent of fear than that promise?

This morning, we will experience a specific foretaste of heaven. As we gather around the banquet table and celebrate the reunion of heaven and earth, we are made friends, as one has put it, with God and with one another. (8) When the bread is broken, the doors of heaven are thrown open wide; when the wine is poured, the saints in heaven raise their cups and sing with us, "Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." The boundaries of time and space disappear. Together we worship the Lamb who was slain, who gave his life so that we might have life eternal.

Let me ask you this question: why would the One who breathed the life into us in the first place and made this earthly existence so beautiful and creative and meaningful, why would that God abandon us to the cold vault of death at the end of this beautiful life?

I close with a conversation that is the product of the imagination of Henri Nouwen. He imagined twins, not born yet, residing in their mother's womb. The sister says to the brother, "I believe there is life after birth."

Her brother says, "No there's not. This is a nice place. Dark, cozy, we have nothing else to cling to but to the cord that feeds us here."

The girl insists, "There must be something else, a place with light and freedom to move." The twin brother was not to be convinced. After awhile, the sister said, "You're not going to believe this either. But I really do think there is a mother."

Her brother shouted, "What are you talking about? You've never actually seen a mother. What put that idea in your head?"

The sister said, "Don't you feel a squeeze once in awhile?"

"Yes," he said, "what's so special about that?"

"Well, I think those squeezes, sometimes they feel good; sometimes they are very painful. But they are there to get us ready for another place. A place more beautiful than this. A place where we will see Mother face to face." (9)

Paul wrote: "We see through a glass darkly now, but the time will come when we shall see face to face." (I Corinthians 13:12) Sisters and brothers, count on the life everlasting. Thanks be to God. Amen.

(1) Sam Wells, "Knocking on Heaven's Door," Duke University Chapel, December 3, 2006.

(2) As quoted in *International Dictionary of Thoughts*, compiled by Bradley, Dameh, and Jones, 1969.

(3) Wells.

(4) Michael Battle, "Heavenly Minded," *The Christian Century*, 10/10/2001, p.19.

(5) Peter J. Gomes, *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*, HarperCollins, 2007, p.152.

(6) Ibid., p. 153.

(7) Diana L. Eck, *Encountering God*, Beacon press, 1993, p. xi.

(8) Wells.

(9) Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Our Greatest Gift: Meditations on Death and Dying*.