

Heaven

Revelation 21:1-5a, John 14:1-3

First Presbyterian Church

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John 14:1-3

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. 2In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? 3And 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.

Revelation 21:1-5a

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; 4he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." 5And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new."

Sermon

Let not your hearts be troubled... in my Father's house there are many dwelling places... I am going there to prepare a place for you... I will come again and will take you to myself... so that where I am, you may be also. I've read those word hundreds of times at memorial services... and no doubt, some of you have heard them many times. Jesus was not preaching a funeral when he spoke them – although his own suffering and death was looming before him. No, he was preparing his disciples for what was in store for THEM – for their suffering and death... and the reality that soon, he would not be there with them in person. So, he gives them his word... his promise... that they would not be separated forever... that he was going to prepare a place for them in his Father's spacious house with many rooms... and that eventually he would come for them so that they might be together forever.

When all these years later, you and I hear these words what we hear is a promise of heaven. Though Jesus never says that word, that's what we think of... and so today I want us to reflect together about heaven. Heaven is a very complicated concept... and I don't claim to know where it is or what it's like... I certainly don't pretend to know who'll be there. I read where Diana Eck, distinguished professor of comparative religion at Harvard, was asked: "Is Christ the only way to salvation? Give me a quick yes or no." Dr. Eck answered: "I am only a professor at Harvard. I will leave the question of salvation up to God."

The truth is we all have our thoughts about what heaven is like and who will be there... and that however we came by them, those thoughts often give us much-needed comfort and peace in times of grief. Well, this morning the lectionary gives us a good opportunity to reflect on heaven while NOT attending a loved one's memorial service... and while not even being IN a church.

What I would like to do is describe two things that heaven is NOT, and then two things that heaven IS...¹ here goes with two things that heaven is NOT. First, heaven is not the continuation of a person's eternal soul. Over many centuries people have taken comfort in the belief that the body dies and the soul lives on... but this is not a belief taught by the biblical writers. Instead, this idea known as "dualism" comes from Greek philosophers who lived centuries before Christ. It's the idea that we have these physical bodies that are completely separate from our spiritual souls... and that at the time of death our immortal soul detaches from the physical body and continues to live. Again, this is not something the Bible teaches... no, for the biblical writers our soul is the breath of life that God breathes into us to makes us living creatures. And when we die, and that breath stops... our life ceases... our soul dies. For Christians, death MEANS death. But death is not the last word.²

Closely related to this is the belief that heaven is our reabsorption into the infinite... the idea that when our bodies or ashes return to dust, our spirits somehow mystically become part of the universe. Many of you have heard Mary Elizabeth Frye's poem that has offered much comfort to giving families:

"Do not stand at my grave and weep.
I am a thousand winds that blow,
I am the diamond glints on snow,
I am the sun on ripened grain,
I am the gentle autumn rain."³

While these are lovely images... which DO OFFER much-needed comfort in a time of grief... like the idea of the immortal soul, this is not something the Bible understands. Because neither of these beliefs acknowledge the finality and completeness of death. Neither requires any trust in God... and even more concerning, neither makes any reference whatsoever to all that was accomplished in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. If our soul never dies... if our spirit is simply absorbed into the universe... there is no recognition of the devastating power of death... and therefore, no need for the life-giving power of resurrection.

Ok then, the second thing heaven is NOT – heaven is not the reconstitution of our fleshly bodies. We hear it all the time – sometimes from preachers like me: "I'm sure Peggy's up there working in her garden just like she did down here," or "I sure hope there are golf courses in heaven so Bob can work on his short game." The implication, of course, is that heaven is essentially a continuation of our earthly life, only a whole lot better... gardens with no weeds... golf courses without too many water holes. But this is not what we find in Scripture and one as esteemed as Archbishop Desmond Tutu gets at the tension we feel. Once Archbishop Tutu remarked in an interview, "I wonder whether they have rum and Coke in heaven? Maybe it's too mundane a pleasure, but I hope so. Except of course, the sun never goes down there. Oh man, this heaven is going to take some getting used to."⁴

¹ This idea comes from a sermon "Knocking on Heaven's Door," preached by Rev. Canon Dr. Sam Wells at Duke University Chapel on December 3, 2006.

² An excellent summary is found in Shirley Guthrie's book, *Christian Doctrine* (WJK, 1994), p. 378-381

³ Mary Elizabeth Frye, 1932.

⁴ Desmond Tutu, Sunday Telegraph of London, April 27, 2001.

Well, to be sure heaven is a physical existence (Jesus spoke of preparing a “place” for his followers)... and the saints will have bodies of some kind (Paul speaks of the putting on imperishable spiritual bodies)... but whatever life will be like in heaven, it will be unimaginably DIFFERENT from what we know here... unimaginably MORE than what we know here.

So, these are things heaven is NOT... Though they offer comfort to some, they simply do not express the scriptural understanding of life and of death and life after death. The Bible teaches that our death is the end of us... body and breath... and our hope lies not in pretending otherwise. Our hope lies in trusting that because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ we will live again!

Now, as we turn to the two things that heaven IS, we look to scripture and quickly learn that heaven is about God... it is where God is... it is that reality that is filled (top to bottom) with the glory of God... it is where God’s perfect love, justice, and peace are the reality, not the exception. One reason our “imaginings” of heaven are so impoverished is that we assume it’s about us. But the Bible doesn’t speak of heaven as the eternal dwelling place of humans... it speaks of heaven as the place where God is... what makes heaven HEAVEN is God. Sam Wells says it beautifully in a sermon preached in Duke Chapel: “For Christians, death is real... but for Christians there is only one thing greater than the overwhelming horror of death – and that’s the overwhelming glory of God. The Christian hope is that after death we come face to face with the wondrous power and love and passion of God, an experience we could liken to a tidal wave or a raging fire or a dazzling light: and yet because of Jesus, that overwhelming glory doesn’t destroy us, sinners that we are, but transforms us into the creatures God always destined us to be.”⁵ Heaven is where God is... it is the place where God’s glory is all there is. This is the first thing... heaven is about God.

The second thing is that heaven is about this world... and specifically, it is about the HEALING of THIS world.⁶ You know, there is this belief - quite prevalent among some Christians – that heaven is an alternative to this life... that the goal of this earthly Christian life is to get out of this world (to literally escape this world) as quickly as possible. These are the people Michael Battle refers to as being so heavenly-minded, they are no earthly good. This is why John Lennon asked us to imagine there’s no heaven... because if all our focus is on the next world, we won’t have anything left to care about this world. It’s what Karl Marx meant when he said religion was the opiate of the people... he meant that the idea of a blissful afterlife lets the rich off the hook in this life. “Just hang on” they say to the poor... “live a good life and you will have your reward in heaven.” White Christians told enslaved black Christians there was no reason to resist their suffering in this life because “we will all go to heaven.”⁷ Some environmentalists think heaven is a bad idea... because it gives Christians permission to do whatever they want with this world. These are all critiques – some of them quite justified, if we’re honest – that heavenly-minded Christians are absolutely no earthly good.

⁵ Wells again.

⁶ Dr. Timothy Keller in a sermon “Heaven” which can be found on YouTube.

⁷ Michael Battle, “Heavenly Minded,” *Christian Century*, October 10, 2001.

But the Bible says, “No... actually it’s the most heavenly-minded people who are the most earthly good... because heaven, when properly understood, gives us the vision and the assurance WE NEED to live fully for Christ NOW. Wandering back to Western Civ class in school, you may remember that in the year 165, during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, an absolutely devastating epidemic swept through the Roman Empire. Some medical historians suspect this was the first appearance of smallpox in the West... but whatever the actual disease, it was incredibly lethal... and during the fifteen-years it lasted, fully a quarter to a third of the Empire’s population probably died of it. Then, a century later came another great plague... even worse than the first... and once again Greco-Roman world trembled as 5,000 people a day, 35,000 people a week, were dying in Rome alone – a city at that time of about a million people.

Now, they didn’t know anything about the source of these viruses or how to cure them... but they did know one thing – they knew they were spread by human contact... that’s how you got it... which made crowded cities especially dangerous. And as a result, folks who had money got out of the cities... even the doctors fled... taking their families to their country estates until the danger subsided. But for those who could not flee... the only thing to do was try to avoid contact with the afflicted. So, when their first symptom appeared, even family members were thrown into the streets... where the dead and dying lay in piles.

But NOT the Christians! The Christians stayed in the cities... they cared for the sick using what we would consider elementary nursing practices... and even more amazing, they cared not only their own, but for everybody’s sick (Christian and pagan)... and by doing so they offered a powerful witness to their belief that these plagues were not the work of angry and capricious gods... but the product of a broken Creation... a suffering creation... that was still being held in the hands of a loving God. One bishop, Dionysius, described how Christians, “Heedless of danger ... took charge of the sick, attending to their every need.” And it is widely believed that because of the care Christians offered to the people, the mortality rates in cities with Christian communities may have been as much as two-thirds lower than that of other cities.⁸

The truth is that what went on during these two epidemics was only an expression of what went on every day among Christians... And the impact of Christian mercy was so evident that later in the fourth century... when the emperor Julian wanted to restore paganism... he told his priests to outdo the Christian charities. But there was no way – because there was nothing there to build upon – They had no leader encouraging them to: “Love your neighbor as yourself” ... “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” ... they had no crucified Lord saying to them, “Greater love has no man than this, that he should lay down his life for his friends.” They had no resurrected Lord who said to them, “Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. I go to prepare a place for you... and I will take you to myself.

And that mattered... their faith mattered... experience of the resurrected Christ mattered... and how they understood heaven mattered.

⁸ Kenneth Berding, Biola University, “How Did Early Christians Respond to Plagues? Historical Reflections as the Coronavirus Spreads,” March 16, 2020

To be sure there are many things about heaven we have NOT talked about this morning. We've not talked about whether heaven comes on the day we die or whether we await our resurrection on the last day... we've not talked about how we are preserving our personal identity

when we've been so thoroughly transformed... we haven't talked about whether the end of the world is coming soon or is millions of years away. We haven't talked about these things because I'm not sure they matter all that much. After all, they're all about us... and if there's one thing I hope you take away this morning, it's that heaven is all about God. Heaven is all about being overwhelmed by the power and love and glory of God forever and ever. And... heaven is about the healing of this world... when absolutely nothing will separate us from God... when there will be no more tears, no more death, no more pain. Heaven is about God making all things new... and in the end, that's all that matters.

Benediction

I want to leave you this morning with a conversation that is the product of Henri Nouwen's imagination. Nouwen imagines twins... not born yet... residing in their mother's womb... having a conversation. 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 the cord that feeds us here." But the girl insists, "There must be something else, a place with light and freedom to move." But the twin brother will not be convinced. After a while, the sister said, "Then you're not going to believe this either, but I really think there is a mother." Her brother shouted, "What are you talking about? You've never actually seen a mother. What put that idea into your head?" The sister said, "Don't you feel a squeeze once in a while?" "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 right now, but the time will come when we will see face to face." Sisters and brothers count on life everlasting... believe in heaven... and practice resurrection every day. Amen.

⁹ Henri Nouwen, *Our Greatest Gift: Meditations on Death and Dying*.