

Finding Heaven

10th Weekend in Kingdomtide – July 23/24, 2005

Sermon Background Study

Luke 23:39-43

³⁹One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” ⁴⁰But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ⁴¹And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” ⁴²Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” ⁴³He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

Revelation 21:1-4; 22:1-5 (NRSV)

21Then 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.”

22Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ²through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. ³Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; ⁴they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

“Will I see loved ones in heaven?”

Not long ago, I came across an instructional picture book written for Jewish children. The book depicts Jewish images of Isaiah’s “new heaven and new earth,” a world remade at the coming of the Messiah. Jews and Christians share common expectations of the bodily resurrection of all people and a renewed and transformed world. In this children’s book, the little girl is thrilled that she will one day again see her grandparents and be able to run up into papa’s arms. This is an image for Christians to cherish as well.

So long as we hang on to the incorrect notion that our life-after-death consists solely of a disembodied existence with God, then it is hard for us to grasp the true wonder of God’s promises. One day, Jesus will return and we will all be physically resurrected so that those who have been reconciled with God may enjoy, with one another, a transformed world.

God is love, an eternal community of three loving persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We are made in God’s image. We are made to love. Our own loving relationships grow out of the very best parts of ourselves. I am confident that one day I will again see and enjoy my own loved ones, including my grandfather. Together, we will enjoy a world free from suffering, death, and tragedy.

Last week, we considered our questions for God about suffering and evil. Today, we turn to God’s promises of a world without tragedy or death, free from suffering and grief.

You better be sitting down for this one. This is one of the most misunderstood topics among Christians and because of our misunderstanding we rob ourselves of immeasurable joy, confidence, and peace. Last April, we received many index card questions about heaven. About what happens to us, where we go, what it is like, whether there are pets, and so on. But the truth is that the Bible has very little to say about what most of us think of as “heaven” and a great deal to say about the “new heaven and new earth,” as in today’s passage from Revelation, in which John is quoting from Isaiah. We have a great deal of “unlearning” to do when we come to our questions about heaven.

“Today you will be with me in Paradise”

Hanging on the cross, Jesus tells the criminal hanging next to him that they will be together in Paradise on that day. What are we to make of this? Are we too headed for “Paradise?” Is that to be our hoped-for final destination, the place where we will be with God forever? In both ancient Jewish and Greek literature, *paradeisos* connotes an enclosed space, such as a garden. We can think of it as a place where

we will be with God, but it could just as easily refer to a place of waiting as to any sort of permanent home. *Waiting??* For too many Christians, our post-death existence consists simply of our soul heading off to be with God while our remains turn slowly to dust. End of story. In this view, Jesus' resurrection is little more than an example; he has shown us that we will head off somewhere ourselves one day.

However, regardless of what Jesus specifically had in mind when he spoke to the criminal, it was certainly not a promise of some sort of eternal disembodied bliss, either for himself or for the criminal – or for you and me. Yes, most Christians rightly believe that upon our death we enter into a joyful fellowship with God, a paradise as it were, but our immediate *life-after-death* is only a waiting station, still anticipating God's promised future, a most material future. There is a *life after life-after-death* that awaits us – and about that life, the Bible has much more to say, though not nearly so much as we'd like.

Jesus' resurrection and our own

The place to begin to grasp all this is with Jesus' resurrection. Christianity stands or falls on the truthfulness of our claim that Jesus was bodily resurrected after his crucifixion. This was no "mere" resuscitation, as if Jesus was yanked back from death on the operating table. Lazarus was resuscitated; he still went on to age and to die. But Jesus was resurrected, passing through death to life-after-death and on to life after life-after-death. One day, we shall be bodily resurrected just as Jesus was. We too will pass from life-after-death to our own, very physical, life after life-after-death. Paul writes that we will receive

the same sort of resurrected body that Jesus received. After his resurrection, Jesus walked and talked and ate. So shall we. Physical bodies need nourishment, shelter, even gravity. For millennia, God's prophets have spoken of the day when God would, in a gigantic burst of new creation, remake and transform all of creation, making it ready for the bodily resurrection of his faithful people. Isaiah spoke of this remade cosmos as "a new heaven and a new earth."

"A new heaven and a new earth"

How would you possibly describe a world that has been renewed and transformed by God? The prophets and biblical writers used very imaginative and poetic word-pictures to convey the beauty and goodness of God's new heaven and new earth. Read again today's few verses from Revelation (all of which are grounded in the OT): ". . . he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more . . . nothing accursed will be found there." Herein lies many of the answers to the questions we asked last week about the suffering and evil in our world.

The prophet Micah spoke of the world's people streaming to God's mountain, where they would sit under trees, beating swords into plowshares. To people often living on subsistence diets, Jesus told stories about great banquets. He healed the lame and brought sight to the blind, for in God's new creation there will be no lame and no blind. Our Christian hope is grounded in the concrete reality of these promises and images. God created a physical world and God has redeemed a physical world. The redemption is not complete but it has begun – and it cannot fail. Our Creator God, our loving Father, created us as unified beings, body and soul, and he will resurrect us as unified beings, body and spirit. Together, we *shall* one day live in love and harmony.

"Where is heaven?"

For the ancients, including the biblical writers, this was an easy question to answer: heaven is where God is and God is up there.

The ancient world's cosmology worked like this. We stand upon the earth. Underneath the ground there is some sort of shadowy, unpleasant underworld. The gods are "up there." Go straight up and the further you go, the closer you will get to the gods. Thus, the Jews spoke of God as the "Most High." As far as his disciples were concerned, when Jesus returned to the Father after his resurrection, he had to go upwards, to ascend.

Our understanding of the universe is quite different. Persons standing in Dallas and in Beijing, both going upwards, would be headed in opposite directions (at least except for that curvature of space and time thing!).

So where is Jesus now? Where is this Paradise of which he spoke? Rather than thinking of someplace tucked into a distant corner of the galaxy, it is probably best to think of "heaven/paradise" as another dimension within God's creation. Perhaps we can think of the arrival of the new heaven and the new earth as the time when this heavenly dimension completely remakes the earthly dimension, when God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. The biblical story is much more about this "merger" of heaven and earth than it is about our going off to "heaven."

Paul speaks of Christians as citizens of heaven. He doesn't mean that we are here for seven or eight decades waiting for the day when we can escape to go to our true home – up there somewhere. No, we are citizens of heaven here so that we might build for the heavenly kingdom in this world. Think of yourself as manning an outpost here, a colony of heaven. As God's colonists, our mission is to do all we can to see that God's will is done here as it is in heaven until such time as God's transformation of this world is consummated.

Daily Bible Readings

(more “word-pictures” of God’s new heaven and new earth)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Isaiah 65:17-25; 66:22-23 Isaiah speaks of the new heaven and new earth</p>	<p>Day 2 Micah 4:1-5 A message about the “days to come”</p>
<p>Day 3 1 Corinthians 15:1-28 Jesus’ resurrection and our own; the destruction of death (v.26)</p>	<p>Day 4 Philippians 3:12-4:1 Pressing toward the goal. See v.20 – we are citizens of heaven; not someday, but now.</p>
<p>Day 5 Revelation 21:9-27 The New Jerusalem. It is too literal to imagine an actual golden cube descending from the skies. See the promise of a glorious city in whose light “all the nations walk” (v. 24).</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Mark your calendars!! *A Passionate Life*

A new six week sermon and teaching series beginning August 14

Do you have passion in your life? Are you passionate about your faith? Are you a passionate disciple of Jesus? We know that passion is key to a fulfilled, happy, and productive life. But passion seems to elude so many of us. Did you ever see another Christian and say to yourself, "I want some of that!" In this new series, we will explore how to regain the passion in our lives and learn some simple easy-to-remember tools to help us in this. You will want to be a part of this!!

July Book Recommendation

Can God Be Trusted: Faith and the Challenge of Evil, by John Stackhouse

When we collected questions for God from our congregation, the most asked category of responses focused upon the difficulty of reconciling our belief in a good God with all the suffering and evil in the world.

Historically, this topic has posed perhaps the most significant philosophical challenge to the Christian faith.

This book is a good introduction to the questions and some possible answers. What I like most is Stackhouse's historically informed and humble approach. He rightly acknowledges that the final question is whom we will trust with questions that can never be fully answered.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

It may seem a bit odd that we talking about Jesus' resurrection when the questions are about heaven. Though we stand during worship each week and affirm our belief in "the resurrection of the body," many of us do not realize that we speaking of our own bodies, not Jesus'. Once we really grasp the truth that after our deaths we are headed for a quite physical resurrection of our own, then we can begin to reorient our thinking about "heaven" and, even better, our thinking about "the new heaven and new earth." Thus, you might begin by talking about the "resurrection of the body." Have you understood this affirmation? Don't be surprised if many people in your group have not; a majority of newcomers to my classes had always thought they were referring to Jesus. What does this affirmation say about your own existence after your death and after Jesus' return? Why do you think this particular affirmation has been one of the least argued over affirmations of the Christian faith for 2,000 years?

If we are to one day have physical bodies in a renewed and transformed physical world, how does this reshape your understanding of "heaven." You might spend some time using your imagination to describe the most wonderful, peaceful, joyful place you can imagine. How might it be most different from our own world? How might it be most similar to our world today? What do you think will be the place of family in the new heaven and new earth? Pets? Work? What we can imagine, not matter how wonderful and good, is only a foretaste of what is possible with God and what is promised by God.