

Can You See Heaven?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

November 15, 2009

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Deuteronomy 34:1-8 (The Message)

Moses climbed from the Plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, the peak of Pisgah facing Jericho. GOD showed him all the land from Gilead to Dan, all Naphtali, Ephraim, and Manasseh; all Judah reaching to the Mediterranean Sea; the Negev and the plains which encircle Jericho, City of Palms, as far south as Zoar.

Then and there GOD said to him, “This is the land I promised to your ancestors, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob with the words ‘I will give it to your descendants.’ I’ve let you see it with your own eyes. There it is. But you’re not going to go in.”

Moses died there in the land of Moab, Moses the servant of GOD, just as GOD said. God buried him in the valley in the land of Moab opposite Beth Peor. No one knows his burial site to this very day.

Moses was 120 years old when he died. His eyesight was sharp; he still walked with a spring in his step. The People of Israel wept for Moses in the Plains of Moab thirty days. Then the days of weeping and mourning for Moses came to an end.

Philippians 1:18b-26 (NRSV)

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, ¹⁹for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance. ²⁰It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death. ²¹For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. ²²If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. ²³I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; ²⁴but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. ²⁵Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, ²⁶so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

What is your vision of God’s work in your life and in all the cosmos? Does this vision sustain you through difficult times? Or do we allow the troubles of this life to rob us of the peace that ought to come from seeing clearly where God is leading us?

In services last weekend, Robert Hasley laid out for us a renewed vision for St. Andrew: *to reach and to serve for Christ*. And clear vision is exactly what we need. As our nation continues to go through difficult and dangerous times, it is easy to be consumed with the present, to see only what lies around us in the moment. But God calls us to lift our eyes and never lose sight of what lies ahead. Not only a life with God, but what we call heaven and the restoration of God’s justice and mercy in every corner of the cosmos. But can we really see what lies ahead, can we truly lift our eyes and embrace what God has in store?

Seeing clearly

Moses was “the man.” The one chosen by God, for reasons unclear even to Moses, to confront Pharaoh and then lead the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt. They followed God into the Sinai Wilderness and, on God’s mountain, the people were given God’s law. To be more precise, the inscribed tablets were given to Moses, who brought them to the people – twice actually, but that is another story.

God was leading his people to a land that he had promised would be theirs, the “Promised Land.” It would be the place they would first conquer and then settle, to live as God’s people, loving God and loving neighbor. You had to figure that if anyone was to get to live there, it would be Moses.

But that was not to be. Moses had disobeyed God in the wilderness and when the people “chickened out” about actually entering into the Promised Land, God told them that they would then never enter the land.

“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 to the rebel on the cross next to him? 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. We are simply told that we will be “with Christ.” What could be better or more comforting?

But being “with Christ” is not the end of the story. When Jesus returns all will be resurrected just as Jesus was resurrected. We affirm this each week when we recite the Apostles Creed, saying that we believe in the “resurrection of the body.” That is our own body we’re talking about there, not Jesus’ body.

I know quite well that this is news to many of us. Though belief in the “resurrection of the body” has been unchallenged basic Christian doctrine for 2,000 years, we’ve still managed to lose touch with it and, thereby, shortchange ourselves. We fail to grasp the full wonder of God’s work and promises. Our vision has become clouded and dim.

And that is just how it worked out. Moses died before Joshua led a new generation across the Jordan River into Canaan.

But before he died, Moses climbed to the top of Mt. Nebo where God showed him all the land that would soon be the home of God’s people. He saw everything: “from Gilead to Dan, all Naphtali, Ephraim, and Manasseh; all Judah reaching to the Mediterranean Sea; the Negev and the plains which encircle Jericho, City of Palms, as far south as Zoar.”

I wonder sometimes how Moses must have felt. He could see the Land that he would never enter. Was he glad to have seen it? Was he pleased to have experienced the vision of a promise kept even if he wouldn’t be around to experience it himself? I’m pretty sure that the answer to that would be yes. It would be for me. Seeing goodness is always good. Indeed, Moses had been blessed to see much – from a burning bush to a pillar of fire to the very presence of God. I like to think that this vision of a quite real God who had made quite real promises to Moses and his people that sustained Moses over the many trying years in Egypt and the Wilderness.

With Christ

The apostle Paul is in a difficult spot of his own when he writes his letter to the Philippians. He is writing from prison and it seems that he doesn’t know whether he will be executed or not.

Here’s the amazing thing. He is nearly indifferent between life and death! Indeed, he rather straightforwardly states his preference for passing on, as we sometimes express it. Read his words for yourself:

“For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you.”

“Will I see loved ones in heaven?”

A few years 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. 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 grandpapa’s arms. This is an image for Christians to cherish as well.

Orthodox Jews and Christians share common expectations of the bodily resurrection of all people and a renewed and transformed world.

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. We rob ourselves of the joy that comes from seeing and embracing the fullness 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 God and 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. We can be confident, God wants us to be confident, that we will again see and enjoy our own loved ones. Like the girl in the storybook, I will again see and hug my own grandfather. Together, we will enjoy a world free from suffering, death, and tragedy.

His desire is to depart (yes, die!) and be with Christ – for that is far better. How clearly must this man have seen the future. How confident must he have been in the resurrected Christ. How sure must he have been that Christ was waiting for him on the other side. Such clear vision must surely have sustained Paul, who experienced great suffering and hardship in the course of his ministry to the Gentiles.

Reading Paul’s letters, one can’t escape his confidence that there is a life with Christ after death (what you and I typically refer to as “heaven”) and a life after this “life after death” when all are resurrected just as Jesus was resurrected so that we might all enjoy God’s renewed and restored “heavens and earth.” [Ok . . . if you are confused by this business about heaven, resurrection, and the life after life-after-death, begin by reading the text boxes. There is a lot more to God’s promises than we often think – it is even better than the best we’ve imagined!]

Casual or captive?

In a recent study of religion in American, the respected pollster, George Barna, identified seven “faith tribes,” that is, seven groups in America who share a broadly-common faith. Two of these “faith tribes” are Christian: casual and captive. The casuals are good people, who care about the poor, and support much good work. But they keep God at arm’s-length. Their faith is not central in their lives. Jesus and his Church are important to them – just not that important. I was once what Barna calls a “casual” Christian.

What holds someone back from being a captive of Jesus Christ? I know that part of it is a failure of vision. The “Jesus-Church” stuff just doesn’t seem real enough. They can’t see, as I couldn’t, the truth that Jesus and his Church are as real and concrete as the chair I am sitting in or the air we breathe. Unlike Paul, being “with Christ” in this life and the next is just not as genuine to them as the problems and the friends and the career and

the amusements of this life. Perhaps a better vision of Christ and the life that he offers is the way to be captured by Christ. As the distraught father told Jesus, “Lord, I believe! Help my unbelief.” May we pray for a clearer vision of our savior and the life he desires for us as we embrace a new vision for St. Andrew.

Encounter

a time for fellowship, worship, and learning
every Wednesday evening at 6:45 in Wesley Hall

This Wednesday (Nov 22): Mark 14:33-15:47

Jesus is tried, crucified, and buried. Why was he found guilty? Must Jesus have died? What does it really mean for us? What's so "good" about Good Friday?

November 29 (Thanksgiving Eve): Mark 16 – Jesus is raised!!

Celebrate Thanksgiving with us as we express our thanks for God's gift to us of his beloved son and for his resurrection.

Can you really think of a better way to spend Thanksgiving Eve?

Coming to **Encounter**:

Christmas According to the Bible, begins Wed., December 2
What a novel idea! We'll look at both Matthew's and Luke's gospels as we learn and reflect on the Bible's Christmas stories.

Song of Songs: The truth about love, marriage, and sex
begins Wednesday, January 13

*Do I need to be at **Encounter** each week to make sense of the lesson?*

No. Though we will be in a book of the Bible, each week's sermon/lesson will stand on its own. We know that many people will come to **Encounter** when they've had to miss church on the weekend. In fact, we hope you will make that your regular practice.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. It may seem a bit odd that we talking about Jesus' resurrection and our own when the topic is seeing 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 are 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? Where is the joy in this affirmation? How might a better understanding of this promise help to sustain us through tough times?
2. 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, no matter how wonderful and good, is only a foretaste of what is possible with God and what is promised by God.