

## *Heaven*

**Genesis 1:29-31** God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. <sup>30</sup> And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. <sup>31</sup> God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

**1 John 3:1-3** See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. <sup>2</sup> Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. <sup>3</sup> And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

**Mark 13: 26-27, 31-33** <sup>26</sup> Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. <sup>27</sup> Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. <sup>31</sup> Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

<sup>32</sup> "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

<sup>33</sup> Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.

## *Heaven*

When I say the word, *heaven*, what do you think of? How do you picture heaven in your mind?

In the scriptures, the word heaven often just means the sky. In Genesis (1:1) we read that God created the heavens and the earth. When we come to the story of Noah and the flood (Genesis 7:11-12), it says that the windows of the heavens were opened and it rained for forty days and nights. It's interesting to learn that every time the Hebrew word for heaven appears in the Old Testament, it is always plural – heavens. That's also frequently the case in the New Testament, as well. A precise translation of the Lord's Prayer would begin, "Our Father in the heavens." In the same way, Matt 10:7 reads, "The kingdom of the heavens is at hand."

Sometimes heaven refers to the abode of God, but we can mix that up with the concept of heaven as the sky, and think of God as literally "up there" somewhere. An early Russian cosmonaut had exactly that picture in his head when he reported from space that he didn't see God anywhere up there. Our understanding of God's abode and presence is more complete if we understand it like the ancient Hebrews. In Deuteronomy 4:39 it says, "Acknowledge today and take to heart that the LORD is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath; there is no other." It isn't a matter of God being "up there" somewhere, but that God is watching over us wherever we might be, just as the sky above is always over us – and that God is beside us, with us, right here, right now.

In Matthew's Gospel, we find the phrase "kingdom of heaven" used instead of "kingdom of God." As a devout Jew, the writer tries to avoid using the divine name and substitutes the word heaven instead, out of respect and reverence for God.

This morning, let's concentrate on heaven in the way we most often use the word, that is, as the blessed afterlife that we look forward to after we die. Oddly enough, Jesus says very little about heaven in this sense, and the rest of the Bible doesn't say a whole lot, either. Jesus tells a parable about Lazarus the beggar and a rich man who ignored him. When both men die, Lazarus goes to "Abraham's bosom" and the rich man goes to the place of the dead and is in torment. It's odd that there's no use of the word heaven in this parable, and God isn't mentioned either. The rich man calls out for relief from Abraham. (Luke 16:19-31) Back in 1955, Rachel Henderlite noted that Jesus "gives us little or no information about the nature of Heaven and Hell, leaving the impression that He is more interested in the present . . . than in speculation about the future."<sup>1</sup>

We get several images from the Book of Revelation. Sometimes we talk about adding stars to our heavenly crown. Those crowns are mentioned in the fourth chapter of Revelation. The thing we usually overlook when we read that passage is that the people don't wear the crowns – they cast them down before the throne and sing praises to God. (Rev. 4:10) The crown isn't treated like an honor to be worn, but a material object to take off and be rid of.

There's a fair amount of detail in Revelation chapter 21, but much of it is clearly symbolic. There're twelve gates and each one is a single pearl. This is where we get the concept of heaven's pearly gates. But it's very difficult to imagine how a single sphere serves as a gate, and cartoonists never try to draw the gates that way. And, John writes that the city and the street are pure gold, clear as glass. (verses 18 & 21) Gold, of course, isn't transparent, so we must read this also as a poetic description.

The apostle Paul writes that we will come to have a spiritual body. He says our physical body is like a seed and our spiritual body is like the plant that grows from that seed. That doesn't give us a lot of specifics, because we all know how very different a plant is from its seed.

It's all rather frustrating to try to get a clear picture of heaven when scripture says very little – and much of that is more poetic than literal. Martin Luther said that we know as little about life after death as babies in the womb know about the life they will enter after they pass through the birth canal. Actually, that's a good analogy. As we heard in this morning's scripture readings, John, in his first letter admits that "What we will be has not yet been revealed." The apostle Paul puts it so beautifully when he told the church in Corinth, "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.

Martin Luther didn't let the lack of known details bother him. He decided that the afterlife was God's business, and he didn't have to worry about it. John Calvin noted that even Jesus didn't know all of the answers. In today's scripture, Jesus said that he didn't know when the end was. Calvin decided that it was "foolish and rash to inquire concerning unknown matters more deeply than God wants us to know."<sup>2</sup> In the same vein, one of the most respected theologians of the past century, Reinhold Niebuhr, said "It is unwise for Christians to claim any knowledge of either the furniture of heaven or the temperature of hell; or to be too concerned about any details of the kingdom of God in which history is consummated." Perhaps part of the problem is that we, with our human limitations, are trying to imagine, comprehend, and talk about that which is beyond our realm of existence, beyond our senses, and beyond our intelligence.

C. S. Lewis, the highly respected Christian writer in the middle of the last century, pictured heaven and hell as being connected by a bus line. The inhabitants of hell can get on the bus and go to heaven whenever they want. But even when they do, they prefer to go back to hell again. C. S. Lewis was making an important point, I think. We choose where and how we live spiritually. We choose not just once, but daily. Our eternal life begins the day we are born. If we are unforgiving, if we are selfish, if we are bigots, or any number of other unloving things, then we will be uncomfortable in the presence of a God who is love personified and perfected. If we can't accept that God loves people that we have hated, that God values people that we thought worthless, that God has forgiven people that we fervently want to punish, then heaven will be a profoundly uncomfortable place. Just as the greatest loneliness can be felt in a crowd of strangers, perhaps the greatest despair is experienced by being out of place in heaven. It's been suggested that heaven and hell may be the same place, but our experience of it depends on who we are.

So, can we know anything? Does heaven have any promise or attraction for us other than the thought that it isn't hell? All of the biblical images of heaven are communal. We aren't isolated, but are part of a vibrant community. There are images of a new heaven and a new earth, a marriage banquet, a new Jerusalem, a choir of countless people of every nation and language singing endless praise to God. So, we know we won't be lonely, but with others who love God. Now, you may have noticed that sometimes there's tension in the church. Despite being Christians and parts of the body of Christ, there can be discomfort with each other, there can be disagreements, misunderstandings, harsh words, and

even anger. But the letter to the Colossians says that we can look forward to the reconciliation of all things (Col. 1:15-20) – "reconciliation between human beings and God, reconciliation among human beings themselves, internal reconciliation within human beings, and reconciliation of human beings and the nonhuman environment."<sup>3</sup> It sounds like we'll be in the perfect crowd, even better than sitting in the stands at a Bulldogs game.

Near the end of John's vision in Revelation, he sees the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down to earth and heard a voice that proclaimed, "the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; <sup>4</sup> he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more. This sounds less symbolic than a single pearl serving as a gate or a street made of transparent gold. The home of God is with mortals. We've experienced that before! God with us. Emmanuel. And there won't be any more mourning or pain or tears. What a wonderful contrast with life now! That fits in with the promise of complete reconciliation.

Here is the best news of all. The strongest clue that we have as to what will happen in the future - is looking at what God has done in the past. What is God's track record? A few minutes ago we heard the last few verses from the first chapter of Genesis. Six times in this chapter God has looked at creation and declared that it was good. Then at the end of the chapter God looked over all of creation and declared that it is very good. The gift of a very good creation is just the start. Over and over God forgave the Israelites for breaking their relationship with him. And God so loved the whole universe that he sent his son so that people wouldn't perish. God didn't send the Son to condemn the world, but to save the world. Now there's a track record that should fill us with reassurance, with hope, with confidence that, whatever the details, what awaits us is even more wonderful. Shirley Guthrie, one of the deep thinkers of the last century, said that we look forward to the completion and perfection of the world, God's good creation. Heaven isn't a place in outer space, but an eternal life of genuine, complete fulfillment of our humanity. It's the life that God willed for us from the very beginning. It's release from all of the frustration, conflict, and internal struggles that come from our attempts to live without or against God and other people. It's the eternal life of fulfillment that comes in loving, praising, and serving God, and in living in peace with fellow human beings.<sup>4</sup> **Heaven . . .** is God's dream for us - a life of reconciliation, peace, and love with the one who is love. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Sisters and Brothers,

Let us put our trust in God!

God has provided so richly and so patiently for us.

Be confident that the New Jerusalem will exceed our wildest dreams.

**(Col 1:15-20 NRS)** <sup>15</sup> He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; <sup>16</sup> for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers-- all things have been created through him and for him. <sup>17</sup> He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. <sup>18</sup> He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. <sup>19</sup> For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, <sup>20</sup> and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in [the] heaven(s), by making peace through the blood of his cross. **(Rev 21:2-4 NRS)** <sup>2</sup> And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup> And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; <sup>4</sup> he 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."

**Rev 21:10-26 NRS** <sup>10</sup> And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. <sup>11</sup> It has the glory of God and a radiance like a very rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal. <sup>12</sup> It has a great, high wall with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates are

inscribed the names of the twelve tribes of the Israelites; <sup>13</sup> on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. <sup>14</sup> And the wall of the city has twelve foundations, and on them are the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. <sup>15</sup> The angel who talked to me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls. The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width; and he measured the city with his rod, fifteen hundred miles; its length and width and height are equal. <sup>17</sup> He also measured its wall, one hundred forty-four cubits by human measurement, which the angel was using. <sup>18</sup> The wall is built of jasper, while the city is pure gold, clear as glass. <sup>19</sup> The foundations of the wall of the city are adorned with every jewel; the first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, <sup>20</sup> the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst. <sup>21</sup> And the twelve gates are twelve pearls, each of the gates is a single pearl, and the street of the city is pure gold, transparent as glass. <sup>22</sup> I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. <sup>23</sup> And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. <sup>24</sup> The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. <sup>25</sup> Its gates will never be shut by day-- and there will be no night there. <sup>26</sup> People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations.

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel Henderlite, *A Call to Faith* (Atlanta, John Knox, 1955) p 147

<sup>2</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 3.25.6

<sup>3</sup> Miroslav Volf, "Enter into Joy! Sin, Death, and the Life of the World to Come," in *The End of the World and the Ends of God* (Harrisburg, Trinity Press, 2000) p 275

<sup>4</sup> Shirley C. Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 1994) p 395-396