

WHAT IS HEAVEN?

Questions from the Floor II (first sermon in the series)

Revelation 7: 9-17 ; John 11:38-44

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Prayer: Open our ears once again, dear God, to the truth beyond the words printed on a page or the words from a preacher's mouth. Startle us with the truth of your unconditional love in Jesus Christ, that hearing, we might live our lives in accordance with that truth. In his name we pray. Amen.

“What is heaven?” the email read. Is it really as trite as the ‘afterlife of eternal bliss’ that seems to be thrown around in popular culture and less rigorous denominations? What happens when we die?”

That is actually a compilation of several emails that I received when a request was sent out for questions, and it is indicative of the fact that those of us in mainstream religious circles, which includes the Presbyterian Church (USA) have not talked a whole lot about heaven in any depth. In a way that’s surprising, for we are a people of the Book, scriptures, and Jesus talked more about the Kingdom of Heaven than anything else.

So in light of how much Jesus talked about heaven, we might want to ask why haven’t we as Presbyterians put more emphasis on heaven?

It starts, I think, with the realization that heaven imagery has often been used and abused to downplay the struggles in this world on behalf of those whose lives are full of misery and oppression by those who have power over them. Slave owners encouraged slaves to come to church. The balconies were always open for them, and some slave owners hired preachers to come in and teach and preach just to the slaves. But there was always one condition: Don’t preach politics. Don’t preach about the problems of this world. Deal only with “spiritual” things. Hold up for them the treasures of heaven. Let them know of their eternal reward if they are faithful in this world. (Especially that part about “Slaves, obey your masters.”) The imagery of heaven was used to keep the status quo.

There is another reason that we have downplayed life in heaven. It is because the biblical writers and Jesus himself were much more concerned with how we should live while we are on this side of eternity, on earth. “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done ... *on earth* ... as it is in heaven.

But I wonder if maybe we have thrown the baby out with the bathwater. The number of questions having to deal with heaven was greater than any other topic. As a pastor I have had to deal with death throughout my whole ministry, but it has become increasingly personal. I check the obituaries of my college and seminary magazines, and there are my classmates. Those of you on

Facebook know that I turned 59 this week, which means I am a good bit closer to my death than to my birth. My mother died earlier this year and I had my own brush with morality shortly after that. Let's face it: None of us knows whether or not we will be alive tomorrow. And the question of what happens next is always before us.

I was about one week into my ministry 30 years ago when this question was first asked of me as a pastor. I was sitting at the kitchen table with "Miss Cannie," Cannie Johnson, a saint if there ever was one. A life-long mountain woman, and widowed for 10 years. Over a cup of coffee she asked, "Preacher, will Robert know me in heaven?" My first impulse was to show here the depth of my knowledge, recite scripture and let her know that that seminary education was all worth it. Thankfully, I simply said "All I know is that God can be trusted. God can be trusted with our lives, and God can be trusted with our deaths." "That's good enough for me," she said.

Some Christians claim to know exactly what happens when they die. They are sure that unrepentant sinners go to hell, and they are happy to describe in detail the horrible tortures there. Some people are sure that unbaptized babies are in limbo, confused souls in purgatory, and true believers go straight to heaven, which they also believe they can describe in detail. But Presbyterians are more circumspect when describing life after death. We believe in it. We believe that life somehow continues with God. And we trust in God's justice and mercy. But we also confess that the details are beyond our understanding.

In the oldest writings of scripture the word "heaven" simply means "sky." When it says in Genesis that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, it means "the earth and the sky." "Heaven" is something that is stretched out over the earth and holds the wind, rain, hail, darkness, and also God.

The idea of heaven as eternal life comes later, from the idea of the reign or rule of God—the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven. It started out with the idea of God as ruler over the people of Israel, providing protection against enemies, guidance and a standard of justice, much like the earthly king would. During the time of the prophets and the exile to Babylon, the sense of God's sovereignty was expanded to include all the nations and all of nature.

But then they asked the question you and I have asked: if God's power still rules over the earth, why is there still evil and suffering? That led to something called "eschatology," meaning the end of history as we know it and the beginning of eternal salvation. The prophet Isaiah, who wrote during the bleak, dark days of exile, wrote: "The Lord will make a feast for all peoples. God will destroy the shroud over the people, and swallow up death forever, and wipe away the tears from all faces, for the Lord has spoken." (Isaiah 25:6-9) Isaiah looked forward to a time in the future when God's reign would be realized fully.

When Jesus came, different Jewish groups in power could not agree over whether there was any kind of afterlife at all, let alone develop a doctrine of heaven or hell. But Jesus believed in an afterlife. "In my father's house, there are many rooms ... (and) ... I go to prepare a place for you ... that where I am, you may be also."

But instead of describing what the afterlife was like in great detail, he simply told stories that gave us a glimpse of what awaited us:

“The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, and when it is found there is great joy.” “The kingdom of heaven is like a tiny mustard seed; it grows and provides a home for the birds of the air.” “The kingdom of heaven is like a great feast prepared in which the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind all come.” He gives us these little glimpses of heaven so that we might have hope about how we are to live here on earth. “It is at hand,” he would say.

He knew that the Rule of God would come, but he rejected the apocalyptic emphasis on the future. Instead, he modeled his message after Israel’s prophets (like his favorite prophet, Isaiah), who spoke of repentance and the need for change in the present. In *this* life in the world, people have the opportunity to make a choice for God, to be transformed and to enter into a new way of living. It is through the choices we make in the present, Jesus taught, that the future is shaped—not only our own personal future, but the future of the world.

He scandalized devout Jews by identifying with the poor, and the people on the margins. He met neither the expectations of those who expected a restored Davidic kingdom, nor the expectations of those who waited for a new military ruler. He claimed no political power, neither, to the great disappointment of his followers, did he seek any. He placed his emphasis not on ritual purity as did temple Judaism, but on the compassion and grace of God.

His only power was his embodiment of the Spirit of God—a power which was, in *this* life, in the end, no match for Caesar’s execution squad. Ultimately, however, God chose to validate both the person and the message by overcoming the power of the world and raising Jesus Christ from the dead.

Now, Jesus had raised folks from the dead before. Lazarus had been dead 3 days. Pretty impressive stuff. But that’s not resurrection. Sure, Lazarus got to live a little while longer, but later didn’t he die like any other mortal, just like all those others Jesus raised from the dead? Don’t they all end up dying later? Sure they do. Being called out of a tomb is definitely life-changing, but it’s not the same as resurrection.

Resurrection is different. When Jesus says to Martha that he *is* the resurrection, he’s not talking about believing in him and just buying a little more time. It was *after* Jesus died that God *really* starting working through him. Jesus’ successful CPR on Lazarus was unquestionably notable, but it was nothing compared to the eternal life he offers.

Death happens. To all of us. No way around it. We may not like talking about it, but there it is. And death happened to Jesus. Really happened. But the whole holy hope, witness, and testimony of our faith, friends, is not that we gain another few days or years of life the way we know it, but that God reached into the black, empty, finality of Jesus’ death, not “near death,” mind you, not “clinical death,” not “apparent death,” just “death,” and wrenched, or beckoned, or somehow *created* resurrected life out of it. *New* life. *Eternal* life. Life that never dies. Life that the disci-

ples couldn't imagine, even when they are told. Life that *we* can't imagine, even when we are told. Life hardly anybody recognizes even when it was right there in front of us. Because the life God works through resurrection is not a function of the life we're inclined to imagine, hope and look for. Not even close.

Resurrection is not a product of the disciples' hope, but of *God's* hope. Resurrection life is not an extension of a believer's imagination; it is the gracious fruit of *God's* imagination. And the only thing disciples can do with resurrection is *behold* it: the way Mary finally *beholds* resurrected Jesus standing right in front of her when, and only when, he calls her name; the way the disciples on the road to Emmaus behold Jesus when, and only when, Jesus sits at table with them and shares bread; the way vengeful Paul beholds Jesus, when, and only when, Paul's eyesight is taken away. The only thing disciples can do with resurrection is behold it when it's offered, when it's shared, when it's revealed. Not to understand it, or explain it, but to behold it.

Leander Keck was one of the foremost New Testament scholars in our country in the latter part of the last century. He was called to be the Dean of Yale Divinity School, and shortly after he arrived his dear wife of many, many years developed Alzheimer's. He adjusted his schedule so that every evening he would be home caring for this wife who no longer knew him. Some of us asked him how he continued his scholarship, because he was still writing books and articles. He would put her down at 10:00 and then study from 10 until 2, when he would finally go to bed for about four hours.

At the end of the year of his class on the New Testament, he read from the wild, apocalyptic book of Revelation. As a child, the only thing I knew about Revelation was the beast with the number 666 as a bizarre and merciless piece of imagery of end times which fundamentalists seized on, trying to scare people into heaven. But he read those lines which I shall never forget, and that I will always imagine in bold as a point of the story:

They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more;
The sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat.
For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,
And he will guide them to the springs of living water;
And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

Kirsta Tippet, in her book *Speaking of Faith* described the scene far better than I can. "As he read this, tears filled his eyes. All of us knew he was thinking of his wife and the terrible grief of the last chapter of their life together. He was cleaving to that promise tucked between Revelation's demons and reckonings and battled: of a tender ultimate encounter with God when the sadness will be gathered up, the defects mended, the tears wiped away. We rose to our feet and applauded him and tears pricked our eyes as well and so did the promise in those lines. You could see this as selective reading, wishful thinking, but looking at the person of Leander Keck, I believed it with all my heart."¹

In the end, friends, we are left with more mystery than proof. All I can say is that I believe it with my whole heart as well, that all ends in God's eternal loving embrace of each individual person, and ultimately of all humanity, those who have lived, and suffered, wept and believed in the past; and all who are yet to be born, and to live out their years on earth, seeking to know the love and the truth of God. And all together will know "fulfilled justice, perfect freedom, unequivocal truth, universal peace, infinite love, and overflowing joy."²

Amen.

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¹ Krista Tippett, *Speaking of Faith*, Penguin Books, 2007, New York, p. 105-106.

² Hans Kung, *Eternal Life?* Doubleday and Co., Garden City, NY, 1984. p. 233