

Heaven is for Real

Part 2 of a 2-Part Series

**A Sermon Preached by
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Carlisle, Pennsylvania
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O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence-- as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil-- to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him. You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed. {6} We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand. Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people. Your holy cities have become a wilderness, Zion has become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation. Our holy and beautiful house, where our ancestors praised you, has been burned by fire, and all our pleasant places have become ruins. After all this, will you restrain yourself, O LORD? Will you keep silent, and punish us so severely?

Isaiah 64

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of

God." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?"

Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

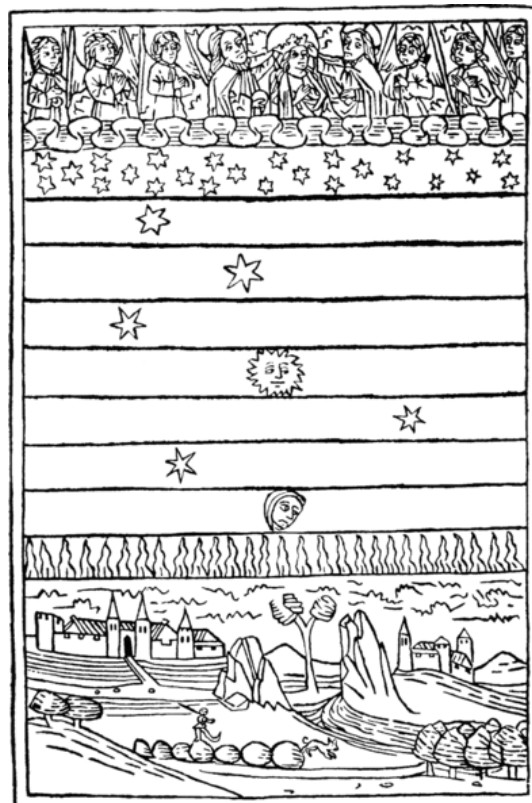
For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

John 3:1-17 NRSV

How would you describe Heaven?

Answering that question was last Sunday's homework. If that question makes your blood pressure increase a little bit because you were here last week and never gave the sermon second thought... don't worry; at Second Pres. we believe in a God of *Second* chances. And if you weren't here last week and you're thinking, "Heaven? That's a pretty deep question to be asking so early in the morning," no worries for you either. By the end of the sermon I hope you will feel more able to describe Heaven to someone else. I'll begin this morning with a little review and then try to tackle some typical questions that people have about Heaven.

I mentioned last week that in Old Testament times people thought the sky was covered with a rugged tent or firmament. Holes in the firmament allowed light from Heaven to shine through, much like the lights in our sanctuary appears to be streaming through holes in the ceiling. Well into the Middle Ages people still had a pretty simple and concrete understanding of the cosmos.



This woodcut from the fifteenth century (Anonymous, 1475) puts the earth down below, but at the center of everything, with clouds, moon, planets, and

sun at progressively higher levels. Above the 7th layer – or 7th Heaven – were the stars. Finally came the angels.

I also mentioned last Sunday that the harp has long been associated with Heaven because it was likely the instrument that sounded most “out of this world” in Old Testament times. Then I suggested that -- if they had already been invented -- accordions might have been the instrument most associated with Heaven. This suggestion drew many comments—and some e-mail. It turns out that I was unaware of a late 20th century rendering of the cosmos that apparently puts these two instruments in their rightful places.



Everyone has a slightly different vision of what Heaven will be like.

Some of these visions are inspired by the Bible and some are not. Even the Bible itself contains such wildly differing pictures of Heaven that they can't all be true at the same time. But even if each of those visions can't literally be right, they all might contain an element of metaphorical truth. I suggested last week that Heaven – God's perfect reign in the world and in our hearts – is so overwhelming a concept that perhaps God allows us to experience it only in bite-size pieces and only in ways that we can easily digest.

God wants us to be excited by the thought of a closer relationship with him, not be frightened by it. That's why when God came to earth God came in human form rather than in the form an eight-headed beast with laser eyes and dragon breath. No one was scared off by the baby Jesus. As John's Gospel says, "Jesus came to save the world, not condemn it."

God doesn't want us to be scared of our future either. So the visions we have of eternity with God tend to be gentle, positive, and truly wonderful. Did you hear what Steve Jobs's last words before dying were? "Oh wow, Oh wow, Oh wow." We don't know if he was glimpsing Heaven or Hoboken, but either way it was more than he could comprehend.

Most of all last week I tried to break us of the habit of thinking of Heaven as a geographical place. Jesus teaches that living in the Kingdom of Heaven is not about travel to some far off place but finding tranquility in the here and now. Heaven is all about God ruling completely in our hearts and in our world. I ended with these words:

- **Where** is Heaven? Here. There. Everywhere God is.
- **When** is Heaven? Now. Then. Always.
- **What** is Heaven? It's not a what, it's a *who*. And that who is God and us. Together. Forever.

Let's look together at a few more questions that our friends have about Heaven.

- **What is Heaven like?** The book of Revelation gives some basic insights. Take some time to read it, especially the 21st chapter. If you boil down all the fantastic imagery you can draw some conclusions. There is a newness about Heaven. In this life everything decays; in that life everything familiar is renewed. There is also a strangeness about Heaven. Heaven is not simply life as we know it, only better (like McRib sandwiches *all the time* and not just "for a limited time only.") The difference is qualitative, too. We will experience new forms of life, strange creatures, and Heavenly beings. There is an awesomeness about Heaven that is simply beyond words.

Certain events of the past ten days remind us how fallen this world is. Our reality sometimes feels light-years away from the ideal that the Bible describes in the Kingdom of God. Moral courage is lacking. Justice is

difficult to dispense. Truth is elusive. Mercy is in short supply. All this makes us want to pray as Isaiah did in our first lesson:

“O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence.”

Isaiah 64:1

We desperately want God to set things right.

If you are one of the many who are really hurting right now--perhaps you've been abused. Or if you feel for all the people caught up in the scandal – and aren't we all? Whatever your personal relationship to the incidents, I can tell you this: in God's eternal kingdom, truth is all that exists. Justice is perfect. Mercy is ever-ending. Courage is unnecessary because there is nothing to fear. Every wrong is righted, every victim is restored, and every injury is healed. (See, e.g., Revelation 21:1-4, Isaiah 40:4, 45:2 and Matthew 20:16) In this life we can't even hope to match that; in the next life it's an everyday fact. That's what Heaven is like.

- **What does Heaven *feel* like?** Have you ever had a moment when you felt so close to someone, so known, so loved, and so accepted that it almost made you cry? In that moment you feel perfectly safe with no fear at all. That's a taste of what it's Heaven feels like all the time: union, oneness, unity, communion. You know why? Because God is there in the same way intimate way that God was with Adam and Eve in the first paradise – close enough to wipe every tear from your eye.

Jesus' liked to compare Heaven to a wedding reception. One thing I loved about living in New Jersey was the wedding receptions, especially the ones for my Italian friends. They knew how to throw a party. Where I grew up wedding receptions were held at the town firehouse or the church basement, with somebody's cousin playing CDs. In Jersey they were in mansions and fancy ballrooms with 9-piece bands, endless food, and everyone together in one place laughing, looking great, dancing, and celebrating. Jesus says Heaven is like that. There's a party every time a lost sheep is found. There's a party every time a lost child comes home. There's a party every time someone accepts Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Heaven is a party that never stops—and Jesus is the bride groom. [For more on this theme, see Tony Campolo's, *The Kingdom of God is a Party.*]

- **How do we get to Heaven?** By now you know that G.P.S. can't help you. And you know we can't earn our way to Heaven any more than you can "earn" your way into someone's heart. Heaven isn't a reward for being nice it's a relationship that comes with being God's beloved sons and daughters. Being "in" heaven is like being "in" love. Not our love, but God's. There's no way to force love – when it finds you, you embrace it. The more we open ourselves to God's Lordship, the closer we find ourselves to Heaven. We can't work our way to Heaven but we can be ready when Heaven comes to us. That's what I think Jesus says when he talks about being "born from above." God's Lordship of our lives is a gift we accept.
- **Who is in Heaven?** First of all, God is. The defining feature of Heaven isn't people or angels or clouds or any created thing. That's the first thing we want to say in any description. It begins with God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Heaven is just another name for God's kingdom.

Jesus was pretty specific about who his royal subjects are. Remember the Beatitudes? (Matthew 5) Each group that Jesus mentions is already part of God's reign: the spiritually broken, the grieving, the meek, the merciful, the peacekeepers, the persecuted, and more. In other places Jesus singles out children, the poor, and the disabled. (see, e.g., Luke 14:13-14 NRSV)

But what if you don't feel like you fit into one of those categories? Let me say this, if Jesus Christ is your Lord and Savior *now*, he will be your Lord and Savior *then*. But you protest, "Jeff, I'm not perfect. I've got a few idols." Join the club. Just because we are not perfect followers of Jesus doesn't mean he won't welcome us home. Even the disciples weren't perfect followers; even they needed his grace. If we are trying *now* to put Jesus at the center of our lives we can know *then* that that is exactly where He will be.

Let me add something. I think there may also be people there who never knew Jesus the way we do. I don't know who they are, but I think they are part of God's invisible kingdom. Jesus may well let them join the party. That's his royal prerogative. This isn't simply wishful thinking on my part or being politically correct; look carefully in John's Gospel and you'll see that God leaves the door open (John 10:16, 21:18-22). It's not up to us to say who's not on God's guest list. Our job is to share with all people the only way we know into God's heart: through a life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ. (John 14:1-6).

- **Will Sammy the cat be there?** I don't know. Is God a cat person? As best we can tell, God put animals here for food, beauty, our companionship and pleasure. But they don't have souls, at least not that we know of. But God may well have a plan for non-human creatures. In the original Greek John 3:16 reads, "God so loved the *cosmos* (that is, all of creation, not just people) that God gave his son so that no one should perish..." So we can't say definitively one way or another, but I can tell you this. Sammy won't be missed; otherwise it wouldn't be Heaven. The unconditional love and companionship we feel from our pets is perhaps a little foretaste of the love we'll experience in Heaven all the time.
- **What will I look like in Heaven?** First, there will be a "you." We don't lose our individuality in God's kingdom; we aren't drops of water that disappear into an ocean of spiritual humanity when we die. There will be you's and me's. But we won't have physical bodies. And that means you don't have to worry about what your age will be or how much hair you will have or whether when you see your husband again he will have lost weight or grown his index finger back. These are questions about material things, bodies. All material stuff is gone in Heaven. What lives on are our souls. And *they* will be perfect. Even the guilt and sin that we carry around with us -- that will be gone, too, because sin is "of the flesh." See Romans 8:5; 1 Corinthians 5:5, Galatians 5:19. It will be washed away in the flood of Jesus' love. Only the very best of us remains. [See <http://www.bible-guide-online.com/kingdom-of-heaven.html> 10/25/11]
- **So how are we supposed to live?** Like God's kingdom is on the way. Because it is! God is revealing himself all around us, every day. Healings, miracles large and small, co-incidences that are really "God" incidences. Look for in-breakings and celebrate them.

And pray. I was on the phone the other day with Kip Bollinger. Kip is one of several members of our Second Family who are fighting cancer with chemotherapy, and a host of other powerful treatments. He was having a great day, feeling much better than he had in weeks. I asked him what he attributed his healing to. Was it the chemo or the antibiotics he had been on? Was it the blood transfusion he had just had? He paused and said simply, confidently, and without a hint of hesitation for a scientist with a Ph.D.: "Prayer." One of the ways that God breaks into

our lives is through prayer. Prayer creates windows between this life and the next – much like holes in the Heavenly firmament. Prayer creates openings through which God’s light shines. By letting God’s light shine on broken bodies and wounded spirits you know something good is going happen to us. That “good thing” will be a little experience of Heaven.

Finally, we can live out our Heavenly citizenship now; we don’t have to wait until Jesus comes again. If we live *now* like God is in charge, like God is already reigning in full, then we won’t be afraid of the future like other people are. We won’t be stingy. We won’t be judgmental. We’ll treat “the least of these our brothers and sisters” like Jesus himself. We will feel truly free. Jesus said, “Seek first the kingdom of God,” and everything else will fall into place. (Matthew 6:33) Look for signs of the Heavenly kingdom this week and see if Jesus was telling the truth.

Heaven is for real, and it’s closer than we think. Amen.

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