

Heaven: The Place Where Dreams Come True

Revelation 21:1-10; 21:22-22:5

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First
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I

There is a story of a woman who went to see a spiritualist to see if she could make contact with her late husband.

The spiritualist went into a trance and soon a voice was heard—
“Mary,” the voice said, “Are you there?”

The woman was overjoyed—
“Elwood – is it really you? Are you alright?”

Elwood: “I’m fine, I’m fine.”

Mary: “Is it nice there, dear?”

Elwood: “Beautiful. Absolutely beautiful. Blue sky, pure air, green grass. And the chickens, Mary. You’ve never seen such beautiful chickens!”

Mary: “Elwood – where are you? Chickens in heaven?”

Elwood replies: “Who’s talking about heaven? I’m a rooster...in Iowa.”

II

We laugh because, like Mary, deep down we all wonder what heaven will be like.

Will it be a place of clouds where we all fly about on angel wings with harps playing in the background?

Will it be a grand reunion with all our departed loved ones?

Will it be where we can finally set aside all the burdens of earth and live a carefree life?

Like the *New Yorker* cartoon that shows two ex-bankers with wings walking across a fleecy cloud, and one says to the other,

“Oh, Eternal life is fine, but what I really like is getting to wear flip flops all the time.”

Will it be the place where all our deepest desires are met and our most fervent dreams come true?

We all carry within us an image of what heaven will be like.

Someone asked a number of children for their opinions of heaven. Their answers are rather interesting:

Eric, eight years old, said,

“Heaven is a place where there is a lot of money lying around. You could just pick it up, play with it, and buy things. I think I am going to buy a basketball and I am going to play basketball with my great-great-grandmother.”

Scott said,

“Heaven is up in the sky, and you could look down at circuses for free if you want to, except you have to ask God for permission first.”

Tommy said,

“I know what heaven is, but I don't want to go there. I want to go to Disneyland.”

But the little girl who understood it best looked at the stars one night, admiring their beauty. Then she turned to her father and said,

“Dad, I have been thinking. If the wrong side of heaven is so beautiful, what will the right side be like?”

I think that little girl is on to something.

I think what we see and experience on this earth and in this life is but a pale shadow of the glory we will experience in heaven.

You think the Grand Canyon is stunning?—
wait till you see the heavenly version.

You think Niagara Falls is magnificent?—
wait till you view it from heaven's vantage point.

You think you've experienced love and joy and happiness in your lifetime?—
wait till you experience them in the life to come.

And notice that in the Bible you don't have heaven without earth.

In the Bible the two always go together.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, says Genesis.

At the end is a new heaven and a new earth, says John.

You can't have one without the other,
and we are wrong to think of one without the other.

Our eternal destiny is not "pie in the sky in the sweet by and by"
or "some glad morning when this life is o'er, I'll fly away."

Our eternal destiny is life with God on a new heaven and a new earth.

Every time we pray the Lord's Prayer we are reminded of this:

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

So let's consider what John's glorious vision of a new heaven and a new earth has to say to us as we think of heaven as the place where dreams come true.

III

First, John speaks of heaven as **a new beginning**.

"Then 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. And I saw, the holy city,

New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." (Rev. 21:1-2)

Four times the word ‘new’ is used in describing the vision—

“new” heaven,
 “new” earth,
 “new” Jerusalem,
 all things made “new.”

Remember when God first created the heavens and the earth,
 God pronounced it “very good.” (Genesis 1:32)

But even then something was wrong—the first human couple was seduced by the serpent and sin entered into the world that God had declared “good.”

So the Hebrew faith came to anticipate a new creation.

The prophets proclaimed that God would bring about a new heaven and a new earth. For example, Isaiah 65:17—

*For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth;
 the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.*

All of us know something about the reality of sin and the grip of the new upon our lives.

We express a fascination for novelty in a variety of ways:

We celebrate New Year’s Day with resolutions we know will be broken before the month is out.

We submit to baptism as a symbol of the cleansing of our sins,
 although we know most of them will crop up now and again.

All our relationships eventually become tarnished,
 and we long for a fresh start, a clean slate.

Sometimes the baggage of memories is too much to contend with, and so casting aside the old, we enter into new marriages, new friendships, different jobs, strange locations.

Some years ago in Xenia, Ohio, a young wife and mother of a one-year-old daughter apparently wanted something new in her life.

When Tiffany did not return home from a shopping trip, the whole community feared the worst and immediately plunged into the anxious task of trying to locate her.

After her SUV turned up abandoned with tires slashed, a nation-wide manhunt ensued.

As we say nowadays, the story “went viral,” and was covered daily in the local newspaper and received round the clock coverage both locally and nationally.

But five days after her disappearance, Tiffany turned up in Miami Beach, Florida with a married man whom she had met at a convenience store while getting coffee.

It turned out the two of them had planned for months to make running away together look like she had been kidnapped.

Tiffany later appeared on the TV show “Inside Edition” and apologized, saying she had felt overwhelmed as a new mother with a full time job and a husband who was attending school, and in hindsight the decision to run away was not right for her.

Everyone was left to wonder what possessed this young woman to put her husband, her young daughter, her parents, her friends, her church, and the whole community through such an ordeal.

Part of the answer is found in how easily we human beings become addicted to the new, habitually laying ourselves open to false starts in the hope that we shall eventually discover the perfect partner,
the ideal job,
the dream house,
the right group of friends.

Then we risk becoming jaded, so that our fascination with and surrender to the new loses its appeal.

The power of John’s vision in Revelation 21 and 22 is that it proclaims the arrival of that which is truly new—

a new heaven and a new earth that is pristine, pure, and perfect.

The wedding imagery reinforces this point.

The holy city, the New Jerusalem, comes “*down out of heaven from God, prepared as bride adorned for her husband.*”

God is going to take the failures and corruption and worn-out parts from the past and turn them into a city fit for his kingdom,
 a city fit for his dwelling place,
 a city in which all things are made new.

Listen to how Presbyterian theologian Frederick Buechner describes it:

“Everything is gone that ever made Jerusalem, like all cities, torn apart, dangerous, heartbreaking, seamy. You walk the streets in peace now. Small children play unattended in the parks. No stranger goes by whom you can’t imagine a fast friend. The city has become what those who love it always dreamed and what in their dreams she always was. The new Jerusalem. That seems to be the secret of heaven. The new Chicago, Leningrad, Hiroshima, Beirut. The new bus driver, hot-dog man, seamstress, hairdresser. The new you, me, everybody.”

So our longing for heaven is rooted in John’s vision of a place where new beginnings are possible because God makes all things new.

IV

Secondly, John’s vision shows us **an unspeakable presence.**

*“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,
 ‘Behold, the dwelling of God is with mortals.
 He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people,
 and God himself will be with them;
 he will wipe away every tear from their eyes.’”*

According to a recent Pew Research poll, 72% of Americans believe that heaven exists.

Interestingly, 67% expect to go there.

I'll resist the temptation to say something snarky, and simply tell you the three most basic things we can expect in heaven.

First, and foremost, **we will see God.**

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said,

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." (Matt. 5:8)

In 1 Corinthians 13 St. Paul wrote,

"For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face." (13:12)

In Revelation 22:4 we are told—

"They will see [God's] face and his name will be on their foreheads."

In this earthly life, the Bible describes our communication with God as "speaking and hearing."

But in heaven, the relationship expands to "seeing and being seen."

The second thing about heaven is **being together in community.**

God has always been concerned about groups of people—
 the Israelites...
 the church...
 the world.

Heaven will be the fulfillment of God's purpose to create a people for God's self.

People often ask, "Will we know each other in heaven?"

I like the answer of one theologian, who in turn asked,
 "Do we know each other now?"

Here's the point: even those rare moments of intimacy with another human being will not compare to the community and fellowship of heaven.

Now we are shown how the people and God will dwell together in a relationship of harmony, peace, and joy.

The third (and final) thing to do in heaven is to **be good**.

This is probably the hardest thing for us to understand.

In this life we struggle to be good and to do good.

We yearn for genuine intimacy...
 we desire to live morally upright lives...
 we want to contribute to making the world a better place.

And yet it is hard to believe that God can take weak sinful folks like us and make us fit for heaven.

The Bible's answer to this dilemma is found in Philippians 1:6 where Paul writes,

"I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ."

Can you imagine being so transformed that your only desire is for the good?

My belief is that we continue to serve God,
 perhaps in much the same way we have served God on earth.

V

A new beginning...
an unspeakable presence...
 and finally, John's vision announces **a majestic victory**.

*"And death shall be no more,
 neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more,
 for the former things have passed away."*

In this life, death is a certainty.

We cannot help but mourn when people we care about die.

We experience both the agony and the ecstasy of divine suffering and love,

and we long to be free of such travail.

We know Robert Penn Warren was right in observing,

"Oh, it's real. It's the only real thing—pain. So let's name the truth like men. We are born to hope that hope may become pain. We are born to joy that joy may become pain. We are born to love that love may become pain. We are born to pain that pain may become more pain."

In truth, the whole history of humankind can be summed up in three words—
born, suffered, died.

John's vision relegates all this to the domain of former things.

Death's bitter sting is removed,
as are all its manifestations.

Mourning,
crying,
pain—all are vanquished.

They disappear along with the tears God wipes away from swollen eyes.

Now at last nothing obstructs our vision of God,
and nothing else matters in all of creation.

Appropriately, the text leaves its earthly setting behind and concludes with God's promise that the vision will not lie, the words will not deceive.

"And he who sat upon the throne said, 'Behold, I make all things new.' Also he said, 'Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.'" (21:5)

These words have a sobering effect,
preventing us from escaping into grandiose visions.

I wonder if the reason we paint heaven with fluffy white clouds and piped in harp music and pave the streets with gold is to make it as otherworldly as possible—
to make heaven as unrelated and irrelevant to this world as we possibly can.

We don't intend to take heaven seriously because if we **really** believed in John's vision of a new heaven and a new earth,
we would change how we live right now.

We would see life from God's perspective...
we would be free of our addiction to the world the way it is now,
and we would get busy transforming this world
until we see God's will done "on earth as it is in heaven."

VI

My friends, heaven is the place where all of our most fervent hopes and dreams of what life is meant to be finally come true...
inspired by the promise of *a new beginning*,
an unspeakable presence,
and a majestic victory.

In that quirky little 1989 Kevin Costner movie, "Field of Dreams," Ray Kinsella turns his corn field into a baseball field so Shoeless Joe Jackson can come back and play. A lot of other players also come, and soon the field is busy with the sounds of the game.

But then at the end of the movie, Ray discovers that his father John Kinsella has also returned as a young man.

Ray introduces John to his wife Annie and his daughter Karen, then as the sun is setting John says to Ray, "It's so beautiful here...I want to ask you something: Is this heaven?"

Ray answers, "No, it's Iowa."

John says, "I could have sworn this was heaven."

Ray says, "Is there a heaven?"

John says, "Oh, yes...it's the place where dreams come true."

Our dream...
and our ultimate hope...
is the new heaven and the new earth...
the place where all our dreams come true,

and where God will wipe away all tears, mourning, crying, and pain,
and death will be no more.

There will be no temple there,
for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.

There will be no need for sun, moon, or stars there,
for the glory of God is its light and the Lamb is its lamp.

There will be no night there,
and its gates forever stand open to all who would come.

There we will see God's face and bear God's name,
and the One who sits on the throne will make all things new.

Now that's something to look forward to!

Amen.

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