

THE WAY TO HEAVEN . . .

(09/01/2024)

Scripture Lessons: Genesis 1:1-14
Luke 17:20-21

“All the way to heaven is heaven.” (St. Theresa of Lisieux)

This morning, on communion Sunday, we are going to pause for a moment to consider the matter of heaven. This topic has been on my mind this past month, probably triggered by the untimely deaths of Shari Sanford, a friend and former parishioner, Ron Sickles, a member of our church and part of one of the prominent families in our church through the years, and my younger brother, Joe. My prayers are with the souls of Ron and Shari and Joe and with their loved ones in their time of grief and loss, and I thank you for your expressions of sympathy to me, my family, and Joe’s wife, Amy.

When I conduct a memorial service or preside over a graveside burial, I raise up the matter of heaven, this important part of our belief system as Christians. A few weeks ago, I mentioned to Scott Johnston of the Morris-Johnston Funeral Home, that the most difficult funerals I have ever conducted occurred while I was the Protestant Chaplain of Foxborough State Hospital. The hospital, which is now closed, had a little cemetery some distance away from the hospital on the top of a small hill. Since the deceased patient’s family had often disowned and abandoned him/her decades ago, there were no family in attendance at the burial, and hospital staff were only occasionally present. There were no headstones; each patient’s final resting place was marked by a brick set into the ground with the patient’s hospital identification number engraved on it.

I don’t know if you can picture me dressed in a suit and tie, wrapped in my long topcoat, standing on the top of this bleak hill on a cold winter day. There were times when no one was present. The funeral director and assistants occasionally stood there with me, but on a cold winter’s day they were just as likely to be ensconced in their nice warm hearse.

In my memorial services, as you know, I direct my comments to the family and friends of the deceased, trying to give them resources from our faith tradition that might help them with their grieving process. But, with no one standing with me at the top of the hill, I didn’t know to whom I was directing my remarks. To the person who had died? To the air? To the universe? To myself? To God? This was a very unsettling experience, one that probably would fall into the category of an existential experience.

The focus of my thoughts in those moments was primarily death, secondarily, what happens after the death of the body, the dissolution of this transient, impermanent form that we mistakenly identify as our loved one—or us. Finally, I thought of the meaning of life, of the

importance of how we live our life, of the so-called “accidents” of life, like a cancer that spreads quickly through us, like an automobile accident, and like a mental illness that can rob us of a certain quality of our life, that can usher in a death of the spirit long before the death of the body.

This morning, we will not be speculating about heaven as a “place” where we go after we die, though we can certainly use the word in that way. The problem with this focus on a place, a place that we potentially enter after the death of the body, is that Jesus said almost nothing about that heaven. He was much more interested in having people experience heaven on earth: heaven here and now. I believe that the heaven that we experience right here on earth is the same heaven that we enter into more fully after we die, when, as the Episcopalians put it, we enter into the nearer presence of God.

I really like the way Episcopalians describe death. I know we are in the presence of God right now, that we are always in the presence of God, that there is no place where God is not. But we only partially realize that we are in the presence of God, if we realize this at all. The odds of us realizing that we are in God’s presence, that we are in God, probably ticks up just a little when we are present at Sunday morning worship. When we die, when we shed this transient form, the soul enters more fully into God’s presence; we enter the nearer presence of God.

The central focus of Jesus’ teaching was the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven (the two terms are used interchangeably). Jesus continually pointed past himself to the kingdom of heaven in an attempt to help his listeners experience this as a spiritual reality both among and within them. In the three different translations of today’s gospel lesson, Jesus tells his listeners that the kingdom of heaven is “in their midst,” “among them,” or “within them.” In this teaching, Jesus is trying to connect his listeners to the realm of the eternal, the realm of the sacred, the spiritual realm that transcends space and time as an experience here and now.

In the world view of the ancient Hebrews, as articulated in the Old Testament, heaven referred to the firmament, the massive transparent dome that was believed to cover the earth, and what was beyond, what was above the firmament. The ancient Hebrews believed that the blue color of the sky came from the chaotic waters that were gathered above the firmament. They believed the earth was surrounded by waters both above and below. At the time of the great flood, we read,

In the six hundredth year of Noah’s life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened. (Genesis 7:11)

You can see why I am not particularly interested in drawing scientific conclusions from scripture. I have my doubts about a literal reading of Noah’s age as six hundred years at a time

when there were no antibiotics, and I don't know how they determined the exact month and day the flood began when the calendar had not yet been invented. We also know that our earth is not fixed, flat, and is not covered with a firmament, an upside-down transparent bowl, as the ancient Hebrews believed. Earth is actually a sphere that moves; it both rotates on its axis and revolves around our sun.

The firmament that is referred to in scripture was thought to be substantial. In Job 26:11, it is described as resting on pillars. In 2 Samuel 22:8 it is described as having a foundation. When the "windows" of the firmament were opened, rain fell. We now know that rain comes from a process of evaporation and condensation of water molecules.

The firmament of heaven was the abode of the stars, sun, and moon. It was the abode of birds and also of God. In 1 Kings 8:30 we read,

Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place: O hear in heaven your dwelling place; heed and forgive.

The ancient Hebrews believed that God did not dwell on earth, even in the temple that Solomon built in Jerusalem, but in heaven. In 1 Kings 8 Solomon says to God,

But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!

The ancient Hebrews believed that heaven was the place where God was enthroned. It was also a place where we might go after we die. The prophet Elijah, doer of mighty deeds, was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:1-2).

The term "kingdom of heaven" appears only in the New Testament. The great majority of references to it are found in the first three gospels, the synoptic gospels, the gospels that describe Jesus' life and teachings. Jesus uses the term "heaven" in the phrase "kingdom of heaven" in a different way than the word "heaven" was used in the Old Testament.

I think this is important. I believe that Jesus was not simply the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah, the one who would lead his people out of bondage to the Romans. He was not simply building upon the foundation that had been set before him. I believe he brought a very new message, a very new understanding of God, a message he taught and incarnated.

The basic message of Jesus and his disciples was that the kingdom of heaven has come near, is already in the midst of us, is already among us, is already within us. At the very beginning of his ministry, as recorded in Matthew 4:17, we read,

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near (or is at hand).”

Mark 1:15, also recording Jesus’s basic message as he began his ministry, tells us,

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news (or gospel) of God (or of the kingdom), and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near (or is at hand); repent, and believe in the good news.”

As recorded in Matthew 10:7, when Jesus sends out his disciples, he does so with the following instructions:

As you go, proclaim the good news, “The kingdom of heaven has come near.” Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.

From these verses it is clear that Jesus was not trying to encourage the worship of himself. Rather, he was pointing past himself to a spiritual reality that “was at hand:” the “good news” or “gospel” of the kingdom of heaven that is at the core of our being just as much as it was at the core of his!

Some time ago, a former Roman Catholic nun who is a friend of mine, reminded me of a quote from the French mystic Theresa of Lisieux. St. Theresa said, “All the way to heaven is heaven.”

All the way to heaven is heaven. We may be on a journey to heaven, but we need to remember that during this journey we are already in heaven! Heaven is not only a goal toward which we strive, either where we go after we die or the time when God’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven. It is here and now! Heaven is not separate from us! It is here in our midst, among us, within us on our journey!

The heaven to which we go after we die is an article of faith. Heaven here and now is an experience, or at least potentially an experience of the divine, the sacred, the transcendent among us and within us. We believe what we do not know. What we experience, we know. Carl Gustav Jung, the Swiss psychologist, when asked by John Freeman during a BBC interview whether Jung believed in God, responded, “I don’t believe; I know!” This is the voice of experience!

The Sacrament of Holy Communion is fundamentally a sacrament of presence. I believe that whether we think of the two sacraments we observe as Protestants or the seven that are observed in the Roman and Eastern traditions, this is the only sacrament of presence. Baptism, confirmation, ordination, and marriage are sacraments of commitment. Confession and last rites are sacraments of reconciliation and preparation. Communion is not a memorial service but a

sacrament of presence. In this sacrament we open our hearts to the indwelling presence of our Lord.

As we join our hearts in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, let us open ourselves to the experience of the living Christ both within and among us, just as the disciples did after the resurrection. The disciples saw the empty tomb; they encountered Jesus in several ways and places in the forty days that followed; and they saw him ascend to heaven. But their experience did not end here! They finally experienced him in their midst, both among and within them, in such a way that they knew they could never again be separated from him! Then they realized what he meant when he said, “Lo, I am with you always.”

Let us dissolve the false separation of space and time separating earth from heaven and us from God that we might be present to our Lord and to each other in this sacrament, and that we might experience and enter into the kingdom of heaven right here and now.

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
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This sermon will be posted on our church website later this week.