

Rev. 21:1 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. 2 And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them as their God;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
4 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. 21:5 And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” 6 Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

A SONG OF HEAVEN

Sing the wondrous love of Jesus, sing his mercy and his grace:

In the mansions bright and blessed, he'll prepare for us a place.

When we all get to heaven, what a day of rejoicing that will be!

When we all see Jesus, we'll sing and shout the victory.

I grew up singing songs like that. The whole point of going to church was to make sure that one day when I died I and those I love would go to heaven. But, we don't hear so much about heaven any more, even from those churches that used to talk about it a lot. Someone in our Bible study this past week said, "You know. I can't ever remember hearing a sermon about heaven."

It hasn't always been this way. Heaven used to be the main topic of conversation when it came to theology. People longed for heaven.

One commentator told of her grandma who had Alzheimer's disease. During her last years of life she would often grow restless in the afternoons. She kept saying, "I need to go home now."

She tried to assure her grandmother by saying, “But you are home.” It was no use. Grandma didn’t believe it. Sitting in her chair she would clutch her purse in her lap, waiting for someone to pick her up and take her home.

She wrote, “Like Geraldine Page’s character in the movie, *The Trip to Bountiful*, she was seeking a home long gone, a home of her childhood or early married years. No present place on earth could satisfy her longing.”

That’s how Christians used to think of heaven. Heaven was not just a place that they thought about at funerals. Heaven was a place that people longed for all their lives.

WHO WANTS TO GO TO HEAVEN?

Things have changed dramatically.

Heaven is one of those words that we still use quite a bit. We assume that everyone knows what we mean. But, when you come right down to it, many of us are not really interested in hearing about heaven. After all what can we know about eternity? Anything we might say would be speculation.

And, more than that, heaven is not a blessed hope for many people. It is just a slightly less terrible way of talking about the end.

I heard a story once about a revival preacher who asked his congregation if they wanted to go to heaven. He said, "If you want to go to heaven, raise your hand!" Everyone raised his or her hand except one little boy.

The pastor zeroed in on the poor little boy and shouted, "Young man, did you hear what I said? Why didn't you raise your hand? Don't you want to go to heaven?"

And the little boy sheepishly replied, "Yes, I want to go to heaven ... some day. But, when you asked us to raise our hands, I thought you were getting up a load to go tonight!"

All of us want to go to heaven some day, but none of us want to go with the group that's going tonight.

HEAVEN CAME DOWN

Another gospel song goes, "If heaven's not my home, then Lord what would I do." But, actually we feel

quite at home here on earth thank you very much. Say too much about going to heaven, and you'll be dismissed as a crackpot instead of someone to be taken seriously.

And yet I sense that many people are not happy with their life on earth. There is a great spiritual hunger in our time. There is a hunger for God's presence.

And so people rush to buy the books of the latest spirituality expert who appears on Oprah. Many people want to be touched by an angel or make it to the seventh heaven. There are many TV programs that tap into our desire to know the future or have some special connection with a power that is above and beyond us.

Maybe we in the church could do a better job of speaking to that spiritual need if we talked about heaven in a different, and I think, a more biblical way. In our passage for today the Bible doesn't portray us as going to heaven, as if heaven were some far away place in the sky. Heaven is not pie in the sky by and by.

Instead the Bible portrays heaven as coming down to earth.

You might say that heaven is an all-encompassing way of talking about the incarnation, the belief that God was in Christ.

So when we talk about heaven, it is another way of talking about the providential care of God. It means that God cares about creation. Just as God sent Jesus into the world to tell us of His love and salvation so God promises to one day renew this world. God promises to recreate this world.

In the words of those who write commercials for TV, the world will be “new and improved.”

Eugene Peterson writes that the biblical heaven “is the invasion of the city by the City.” Heaven is not escaping the place where we live. Heaven is the sanctification of the place where we live. Heaven is when God makes the earth holy. Heaven is our home. But, heaven begins here on earth.

A FORETASTE OF GLORY

In the Lord’s Supper we say the sacrament is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet. In other words, when God’s people gather and remember God’s grace in the past they are also given a vision of the future that changes their lives today.

The Bible tells us that the Spirit of the Lord transforms us, “changing us from one degree of glory to another.” (2 Corinthians 3:17-18) In a way this is the story of the whole Bible. Remember when Moses had been speaking with God? Moses’ face glowed. It was as if the glory of God spilled over onto him.

The same theme is continued in the Gospels. On the mountaintop Jesus is transfigured. His face shines like the sun, and his clothes become dazzling white. He reflects the image of God in an even brighter way, and Moses and Elijah join Jesus on that mountaintop of glory.

The message is clear. God’s glory is invading the earth in ways that are more and more dramatic. And the light reflected by the risen Christ is increasing instead of decreasing. Paul said that glory is spreading throughout the world and into our lives. “The light of the knowledge of God” is shining in our hearts, and that light changes us. That light transforms us. (2Corinthians 4:6)

Now certainly that does not mean that we are perfect or that our world is getting better and better. Indeed, a case could be made that we are getting worse and worse. If you read the entire book of Revelation

many of the images are painfully destructive. Revelation's other name of course is the Apocalypse, and we speak of catastrophic events as being apocalyptic in nature.

But, what many of the prophets of doom and gloom do not emphasize enough is that gloom and doom do not have the final say. The book of Revelation is ... in the end ... a revelation of the triumph of God's grace as revealed in Jesus Christ.

This morning we read that in the end God "the home of God is among mortals." In the end the light of God overcomes the darkness. In the end all those things that make life hard are replaced by the healing touch of God's glory.

This is heaven.

And this is the vision of glory that guides our life and work together today. We often joke about the man who is so heavenly minded that he is of no earthly good.

But, I would suggest that the opposite is true. Only the heavenly minded can embrace life to the fullest. An eternal perspective transforms our life here and now.

MICHAEL, LONGING FOR ANOTHER WORLD

In the movie Michael, John Travolta plays an archangel who longs not for heaven but for earth. The movie's theme song goes, "Though this world is dear to me, heaven is my home; this is where I long to be, but heaven is my home."

In this movie an angel leaves heaven so he can relish the pleasures of earth. In one scene this archangel is watching a little dog roll in the grass, and he says,

"Now that's my nature. I'm a grass roller! But, I'm doomed to live in one place and crave the pleasures of another. This is my last blast—twenty six, that's all we get ...I'm gonna miss everything so much."

In a delightful twist, Michael's home is in heaven but he is homesick not for heaven but for earth.

Of course this is just a movie, and we're certainly not angels. But, the theme of this movie poses a dilemma that confronts us all.

If we say that heaven is our true home, might we be tempted to think that we're just biding our time here

on earth ... that, like Michael we are “beings trapped in one world but craving the pleasures of another.”

On the other hand if we say earth is our home, there is another problem.

Some of us feel fit and strong and look forward to the coming days. But, as many of us are painfully aware that these bodies grow old. We can be injured or killed in the blink of an eye. We are subject to terrible and debilitating disease.

Our jobs can be fulfilling and exciting, but they can also be frustrating and pointless. Our lives can be filled with worries about money and family.

In the middle of all these problems we might ask, “Is this all there is?”

HEAVEN BEGINS HERE ON EARTH

The Bible doesn't give an either/or answer to that question. The Bible gives a both/and answer. Life is about heaven and earth. Both are important and God blesses both. To say it another way, “Heaven begins here on earth.”

Eugene Peterson puts it this way, “Many people want to go to heaven the way they want to go to Florida—they think the weather will be an improvement and the people decent.

But the biblical heaven is not a nice environment far removed from the stress of hard city life. It is the invasion of the city by the City. We enter heaven not by escaping what we don’t like, but by the sanctification of the place in which God has placed us.”

Isn’t that the vision that John saw long ago? It’s viewing this world through the lens of God’s future.

Whenever I have a funeral I always use this passage. In particular I emphasize what will be missing when God creates a new heaven and a new earth. There will be no more sorrow, no more suffering and no more death. God will be with God’s people and will wipe away every tear.

Now the people who are listening to this message have every reason to be cynical about this heavenly promise. You would expect them to say something like: “What do you mean there will come a day when there will be no more sorrow? My life is filled with sorrow today. How can you say that there will come

a day when there will be no more suffering? My life is filled with suffering. How can you say that there will come a day when there will be no more death? Death dominates my thinking on this day.”

And yet I can tell you that many do not respond in this way. They are grateful for these words.

Despite their tears and sorrow they find in the words of this vision a hope that transcends the tragedy of the moment. Through the power of this poetic passage they are able to imagine a God who wipes away every tear.

And this God does not just wipe away our tears of personal pain. God wipes away all tears, including those tears that we have caused.

A VISION BORN OF GOD’S CHOICE

Now you could cynically say that this is an unrealistic vision. You could say that this view of the world does not square with reality. The tears of pain and guilt seem to live forever in this world. In some instances grudges are held for centuries.

If it all depended upon us I would say that this dream is very unrealistic. But, it doesn’t.

That's why this vision still brings hope to the most hopeless of people and places. This vision of heaven coming down still has the power to change things today. This vision of the glory of God recreating the world still suggests a salvation that is above and beyond us.

Notice that this transformation doesn't occur because we are so clever and pious ... quite the contrary. This transformation occurs because God chooses to come into our world and change things. The sovereign God decides to live among us. The sovereign God decides to make all things new. The sovereign God decides to end death and wipe away every tear.

I think it's important to remember that this vision was born in pain and sorrow. John was an old man in exile when this vision came to him. It is possible that his days were filled with hard labor and despair.

And yet in this lonely place where hope seemed to be in such short supply a hope was born from above that still changes our lives today. Heaven did indeed come down to earth, and the power of God's word continues to transform us ways that we cannot even imagine.

God himself is still with us. God will never leave us. God continues to care for us ways we can scarcely imagine.

THE SACRAMENT AND HEAVEN

Our lesson for today ends with a wonderfully rich image. John hears God say, “To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.” (Revelation 21.6)

It reminds us of Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well; Jesus invites the woman to drink of living water that will quench every thirst.

It also reminds us of the invitation of the prophet Isaiah who proclaims, “... everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.” (Isaiah 55:1)

Words do fail us when it comes to describing heaven. But, this passage suggests that there is a sacramental quality to life and the hope of heaven.

Just as we seek food and water when we are hungry and thirsty so we need to seek the grace of God. We seek the food and drink that only God can provide.

Today God offers us a taste of heaven, a foretaste of that divine banquet. When we serve this bread and cup today we are reminded that there is a new day coming, a day when grace will reign supreme ...sins will be forgiven and tears will be wiped away. And that hunger in our hearts that even the blue plate special can't fill will be quenched by God's holy meal.

Who wants to go to heaven? We don't have to wait. Heaven begins here and now. Jesus tells us once again, "This is my body, broken for you. This is my blood, shed for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

Amen.