

Heaven Is...?

Pondering Questions: Part 4 “Heaven Is...?”

Rev. Cameron D St.Michael – September 11, 2022

14th Sunday After Pentecost

Readings: Matthew 13:44-50; 1 Corinthians 15:50-58; Mark 12:18-27

Reflection: Psalm 84

Greeting: The Lord gives wisdom, from him comes understanding. The Lord stores up sound wisdom for the upright. He guards the path of justice and preserves the faithful. Let your wisdom enter our hearts and minds, O Lord! (*Proverbs 2*)

Prayer: O God, keeper of wisdom and understanding, you have brought us together into your presence this day. Grant us grace to worship you as we seek your blessing and your knowledge. Help us to grow in heart and mind with you, Lord. Build us up in your spirit so that we may know your love and be strengthened by your righteousness. Help us to be bold in our faith so that we may do your will joyfully and eagerly. May we worship you in a spirit of truth, that we may follow you all the days of our lives, through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

Reflection: Psalm 84

How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! My soul longs, indeed it faints, for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God. Even the sparrow finds a home and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God. Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise. Happy are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion. As they go through the valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs; the early rain also covers it with pools. They go from strength to strength; the God of gods will be seen in Zion. O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer; give ear, O God of Jacob! Behold our shield, O God; look on the face of your anointed. For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness. For the Lord God is a sun and shield; he bestows favor and honor. No good thing does the Lord withhold from those who walk uprightly. O Lord of hosts, happy is everyone who trusts in you. (Psalm 84 NRSVue)*

We read the words of Psalm 84 and hear how good it is to be with God. That being with the Lord is a joy and that trusting God brings us happiness. How do you share the joy of God with other? How do you bless others in your daily life? What hope does God’s care give to you? How do you give that hope to others? How do you share in your life in Christ? What does it mean to you to share in the love that God has shown you?

Prayer: O God, you are our hope and our praise. Help us to seek your wisdom in all that we are and do. May we be strengthened by your steadfast love and faithfulness as we come before you in prayer this day. Help us Lord, that you lift us up in both our joys and our sorrows. Be with us in both our laughter and our tears. May your light guide us and lead us to life everlasting, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Now let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Sermon:

Our scripture readings for today comes from the New Revised Standard Version Bible. Our first reading for today comes from Matthew chapter 13 verses 44 through 50.

[Jesus said] "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and reburied; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (Matthew 13:44-50 NRSVue)*

Our next reading for today comes from 1 Corinthians chapter 15 verses 50 through 58.

What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Look, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: "Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brothers and sisters, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain. (1 Corinthians 15:50-58 NRSVue)*

Our final reading for today comes from the gospel according to Mark chapter 12 verses 18 through 27.

Some Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him and asked him a question, saying, "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no child, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. There were seven brothers; the first married and, when he died, left no children, and the second married the widow and died, leaving no children, and the third likewise; none of the seven left children. Last of all the woman herself died. In the resurrection, when they rise, whose wife will she be? For all seven had married her." Jesus said to

*them, "Is not this the reason you are wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God? For when people rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like angels in heaven. And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the story about the bush, how God said to him, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is God not of the dead but of the living; you are quite wrong."
(Mark 12:18-27NRSVue*)*

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

We come to a cluster of questions that all group together under the heading of "Heaven Is...?" These were some difficult questions and I've tried to gather up all of them into one because there's been a handful of different questions all under the same umbrella. So, if I missed one, please let me know. But I'm hoping that this will cover all of them that I've received. Part of the problem we run into is a lack of detail about the hereafter. And this becomes difficult because of the fact that we have a lot of questions, and we expect there to be answers. But one of the issues we run into is that the Kingdom of Heaven is often referred to in various terms, but when Heaven is described and what things will be like we're often given what it's similar too, but not what it is. Part of the problem with that is that we go looking for the answers and sometimes we will find the answers we want to hear outside the Bible. And I didn't include any of that in here because I'm trying to keep things strictly to what we are told in Scripture for this question. There are a lot of books that talk about what heaven is like and what things will be like there, but they take a lot of liberties with putting forward what amounts to a guess as the one true answer. There are also a lot of questionable books from people who claim to have witnessed heaven. For me, the most interesting part of those books is just how little any two agree with each other. Because of that, I am not going to be including anything that comes from outside sources and try to convey what we know from Scripture.

. Our first reading gives us an idea of why it's so difficult to get details. In Matthew's Gospel account we have Christ talking about how the kingdom of heaven is like various things. Like a treasure hidden in a field, like a merchant in search of fine pearls, or like a net thrown into the sea that caught fish of every kind. And there's more than just these but I included these just to give a brief overview of the different comparisons that are made. Now the issue we run into with this is that all of these things describe how precious the kingdom is. Everything we are given talks about how good it is. But there's very little detail about what it really is. And that becomes an issue for trying to describe what it will be like. We know that it will be good, it will be in God's presence, it will be free from struggle and pain, and these are things we in the Bible. But it can be difficult when we're looking for more specific answers. But I think there is a reason why we have so little. But before we get there, I want to talk about a few of the other statements we have from the Bible. One of our other readings is from Paul's letter to the church in Corinth. Paul is trying to flesh out an understanding for the church there. There will always be debate over how to read Paul, but I think Paul gives us an interesting insight here. Because what Paul admits to is a mystery. He says that what is perishable will become

imperishable. The mortal body puts on immortality and death is no more. Part of the reason I highlight the mystery is that Paul's also proclaiming that he doesn't fully understand it himself. But he does his best to explain it. What Paul does understand is that we become like Christ and that's enough for Paul.

In our final reading, the Sadducees come to pose a question to Christ. It is not a question in good faith, but one meant to try to make him look foolish. The Sadducees don't believe in the resurrection of the dead, so they decide to pose what is supposed to be a very tricky question. Now, in case you did not know what they are referring to, I'll include a little history here. There is a law in Deuteronomy that basically says if a man dies childless, his brother is supposed to marry the widow in order to give her a child to be the heir of the dead brother's household. I have touched on this law before when discussing Christ's genealogy and the story of Tamar. In this question, the Sadducees take this idea to the extreme with seven brothers. If the woman is married to each of them, whose wife will she be after the resurrection? Christ both defends the idea of the resurrection and clarifies a misconception about the afterlife. In the resurrection there will not be people given in marriage nor will they marry, but they will be like the angels in heaven. This is not terribly descriptive either, but it gives us some insight. The first point is to note that Jesus uses the comparison of "like angels" and not that we become angels. That is to clear up a question on if we become angels when we die. We are like angels in that we are in the presence of God, but we are not told that we become angels. We are human, but changed, a part of the mystery Paul was looking at. We are no longer mortal, and in that we could draw a comparison to angels, but we are never told that we become angels. Now, looking at that idea of change brings us to another question related to how we change. Will we recognize each other in heaven? This can be a little tricky because the answer is more implied than stated in Scripture. I believe that we will be able to recognize each other. But I don't know exactly how. Because the Bible implies that we will be reunited and recognize each other. And I'm reminded of the Transfiguration. The disciples with Jesus recognized Moses and Elijah, even though they'd never seen them before. So, I would posit that even if we do not physically recognize each other, we should still know one another. Because I don't know what a mortal body turned immortal look like. I don't know if we will be changed to the point that we don't look the same. Now with that, I don't know what it will be like, and I don't know what it will look like. I also don't know what all will be in heaven and what won't be. I can't tell you if our pets are there, as it is another area that the Bible is silent on. I can't tell you what activities we will take part in. We simply don't have anything to go on. And you might feel that is a rather common refrain when discussing life eternal. You'd be right. But I think there is a reason for that.

You'll notice I didn't include any of the descriptions from Revelation. This is due to the difficulty in knowing what is symbolic and what is literal. It may give some descriptions, but I would be remiss to put them all forward as exact details and not symbolism that is much like our "heaven is..." statements in our reading from Matthew. We may hear about the new

Jerusalem come down, but I honestly couldn't tell you that it isn't a symbolic vision. Especially given the use of numbers in the account. There will always be debate over it and I'm happy to discuss it, but there really is just too much information to go over for one sermon. But it is interesting that we have yet another symbolic description that seems to struggle to put into words what things will be like. The Bible is silent on many of the issues of exactly what heaven will be, and the silence doesn't mean a yes or a no to many of our questions. The silence simply means that it was not a priority. Most of what we get is from Christ, and Christ's saving message is about our salvation.

Which brings us to another point. Sometimes we get so focused on heaven that we begin to forget about this life because we are so focused on the next. In truth, Christianity has often struggled with keeping a focus on our lives here and now. We quickly become so interested in what comes next that we begin to lose focus on the main part of what Christ teaches us: how to live right now. We can lose track of what our salvation means today because we are so focused on what comes next and what it will be like. It reminds me of an opening line from "Jesus Christ Superstar" which says, "your followers are blind, too much heaven on their minds." The church has often struggled with this, as we can become too focused on getting into heaven and not enough on what we make of this life. But that's always been the focus of scripture, to tell us how to live this life. We are told how we can make the most in Christ with the life that we have by helping others and doing good. And I believe that's part of why we don't get any big descriptions of heaven. Christ's focus wasn't to let us know all about what comes next, but to teach us how to live this life to its fullest so we will be ready for what comes next. He gives us the idea of what comes next to relieve our anxieties, not for it to become our goal. When we live out Christ's love in this life, it prepares our hearts and our souls for what does lie beyond. Christ offers us peace and comfort in not knowing, because he tells us what we do need to know: that he will be with us, that there is a place for us, and that God's love will see us through. When we live our best life in this life, we prepare ourselves for that life. And you know, I don't know what it will be like.

But I can also accept that not only do I not need to know, but I might also not be able to understand it if I did. At least, not as I am. I often think that it's not described because I compare it to trying to describe light. Scientifically light is a massive scale and humans see just this small sliver in the middle. How small is it? We see about 0.0035% of light. And even that can be hard to describe. Imagine if we could see 1% of light, we would need new words to describe it all. How much harder would it be to describe 20%? What about 100%? I don't even know where to begin because it is simply beyond my ability in this body. And maybe that's what heaven is like when trying to describe it. To describe immortality to the mortal. I don't know what our bodies will be like or what will be there or who will be there. But I do trust in God's promises that it will be good and that we will find joy everlasting. And that our mission now is to focus on living this life the best we can and to help others live this life the best they can. That this be a world of love that prepares us for the hereafter, but also makes this world a

little bit more like God's kingdom with the prayer the two will simply be one. But until that day, I keep the hope of heaven in my heart, but I always act with the love of Christ to live this life the best I can, knowing that I don't have to have all the answers. Because what we do know is that Christ will be with us, from here to there and forevermore to help us live this life the best we can and to let us know that it's okay not to know. So, we may ponder that mystery, but let us do so with love in our hearts, preparing ourselves for that life by living this one to the fullest, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Prayer of Confession and Pardon: God, you are with us even when we turn away from you. Guide us back into your loving arms. Judge us not by the perfection of our actions but show us mercy and love. We have strayed like lost sheep from your ways, failing both in what we have done and what we have failed to do. Bring us back into your fold that you may guide us and lead us in all things. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy upon us and forgive us. May we walk in your love and trust your ways. Amen.

Almighty God have mercy upon you. May the Lord forgive all your sins and lift you up in love through Jesus Christ our Lord, and by the Holy Spirit keep you in life eternal. Amen.

Offering: If you are so moved to make an offering, you may send it to the church treasurer, or you may send it to the PO Box listed below. We are still the church, and the church still needs your support to keep doing all the important work that we do.

Lord's Prayer

Dismissal with Blessing: May we go forth reflecting God's love in our lives as we go forth in the peace of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Current Series – Pondering Questions

Our series will have Pastor Cameron answering your questions! Get them to him however is most convenient for you and he will be using those as the basis for our weekly message!

Prayer List

Rev Charliam Renner	Bishop Frank Beard	Our Conference	Our Healthcare Workers
Patti Corder and the Greenup Ambulance Crew		Eric Veach	Ed & Verna Titus
Henry Catey	Jake Kiser	Cindy Cisney	Nancy Hoke
Family of Don Wells	Tricia Adkins	Don Stewart	Ronnie Winstead
Dwight Parsons	Lauren Stewart	Phyllis Gabel	Sage Martin
Dalton McFarland	Ruth Ann Finley	Jodie Bunch	Tom Finley
Laura Carlen	Rosie Chancellor	Susie Callahan	Kenny Holmes
Chuck Hogan	Brittany Gilbert	Jackie Potter	Family of Don Holsapple
Family of Loise Roberts	Jeremy Klinger	Phil Hawickhorst	
Richard Durham	Kathy Hanks	Wayne Carrell	Gary & Mary Winterrowd
Leo Smith	Sue & Bob Smyser	Larry Thompson	Nick & Leana Ochoa
Family of Bunny Sparks	Greg Williams	Martha Roberts	Charlie & Charlotte Baxter
Paul Schulte			

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