

WHAT ABOUT HEAVEN?

2 CORINTHIANS 4:16-5:1

NOVEMBER 4, 2007 - ALL SAINTS, NECROLOGY, COMMUNION
THOMAS H. YORTY, WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

In 1991 guitarist Eric Clapton lost his two year old son when the boy fell from a New York City apartment to his death. The uncanny sequence of events that allowed the tragedy to happen involved three people who to this day find it incomprehensible.

As a way of dealing with his grief, Clapton wrote a song, *Tears in Heaven* that raises the questions many of us ask at the death of a loved one:

Will we recognize each other in heaven? Will we be the same—our relationships and bonds? Will there be intimacy and mutual support?

I'd like to talk about heaven not only because this is the Sunday we celebrate All Saints and read the necrology but because it is a subject the church too often shies away from.

The emphasis at Easter when it comes to resurrection and afterlife is often on the strength God gives us to live this life. But you can almost hear the question rising from the pews—what about heaven?

Maybe it was Karl Marx who got us thinking we shouldn't ask about heaven—the crutch of Christians he said and a distraction to the injustice of this world. Or perhaps our scientific sophistication that requires verifiable explanations for all phenomena inserts skepticism into our thinking.

I can imagine some of us have simply shut the questions away so fantastic is the claim of a life beyond death and so far does that state of perfection and glory seem from our day to day living. “We speak of Heaven,” says the poet, “who have not yet accomplished even this, the holiness of things.”^[i]

But if we let ourselves contemplate it, says Fred Buechner, heaven is there poignant as grief; the sight of which we catch in glimpses. And from one of his own glimpses of The Paradiso Buechner says this, he says,

“all the major creeds affirm belief in resurrection of the body or the belief that what God in spite of everything prizes enough to bring back to life is not just some disembodied echo of a human being but a new and revised version of all the things which made her the particular human being she was and which she needs something like a body to express: personality, the way she looked, the sound of her voice...in some sense her face.”^[iii]

A new and revised version say Buechner and the creeds. “Behold I make all things new,” is a promise from Scripture I suspect all of us long to have fulfilled in our own lives.

In heaven, everything that ever made any city dangerous, threatening, heartbreaking is gone. You walk the streets in peace. Children play unattended in the parks. No stranger goes by whom you can't imagine as a fast friend.

The city, creation, has become what those who loved it always dreamed it would be: the new Jerusalem; the new Chicago, Baghdad, Moscow, Darfur. The new bus driver, hot-dog man, seamstress, hairdresser, the new you, the new me, everybody.^[iii]

Perhaps no poet or theologian probed heaven as fully and eloquently as Dante in his *Divine Comedy*—the story of a pilgrim ascending from hell through purgatory and into paradise.

His guide is first century poet Virgil, his inspiration is Beatrice who takes over from Virgil after the two travelers make their way from the inferno and purgatorio into the gates of heaven. It is she who vindicates the truth claims of revelation.

Church historian Jaroslav Pelikan explains Dante's plan, "What nature and reason, for which Virgil was the spokesman, had been able to perceive was valid, but it was not sufficient for salvation. The mystery of the word and will of God went beyond human insight and achievement. Yet that did not mean abolishing nature and reason, but perfecting them by the authority of divine revelation and the doctrines disclosed through it."^[iv]

But what drives the *Divine Comedy* says Pelikan is the vision of the Trinity: The Love that moves the sun and other stars...a principle articulated first by Augustine and borrowed by Dante to refer to the intimacy of the Godhead, that is, the partnership of God with God's self—the first community in creation, in three persons.^[v]

Dante as theologian raises, as do all great theologians more questions than he answers but more importantly Dante as poet bequeaths us a vision for and trust in a mystery that speaks to our deepest creaturely completion and fulfillment.

Nor is his a lone voice. St. Bonaventure: everyone in heaven our new best friend; Fra Angelico painting the saints dancing in joy; Jonathan Edwards as fierce as was his picture of hell telling of heaven as a place and state of healing and reconciliation; Emily Dickinson talking simply of recognizing her neighbor. "Grant to me on earth what seems to thee blest until in heaven," said Isaac Watts, "I see the rest."^[vi]

Since "this" is the beginning of "that" what life here offers at its best is a foretaste of the life to come. The two are congruent, all of a piece: no disembodied echoes or eternal equilibriums or re-manifestations in higher or lower beings in the Christian faith.

And as good as Dante gets describing the life to come he is still only second best because the new life is, finally, unutterable in its splendor and glory. But where words fail sacrament and music take over.

Sacrament in this sense, so great was Christ's love for God and God's love for us he gave us Jesus who sacrificed his life, gave it away for others. The Mass—the one we are hearing today, any Mass, any Protestant service of Communion—re-presents that one time sacrifice to each new generation. This is a foretaste in worship of the depth of love we receive in heaven.

And music? What better than the harmony of diverse instruments, chords and voices to express the harmony of God's love which binds everything together in peace at the end.

And if that music is composed with inspiration and presented with passion as is ours today, making the ‘rafters ring’ as the *Buffalo News* said of our choir performing this Mass last Sunday we catch a glimpse of heaven do we not?

I invite us today to glimpse into the mystery of our life and faith that “in and with and under” as Luther said the stuff of this life God is to be found.

Buried perhaps like treasure, but in all of us nonetheless: God’s image imprinted on every human heart. The best we have it in us to become. You see it in the least likely faces.

The bottle-collector riding his garbage bag laden bike talking to himself a mile a minute, crazy as a mad-hatter, working as hard for his five cents a can as any one of us in our classrooms or studios or board meetings; the prostitute broken by life but finding in her survival a will to survive albeit at her own expense and abuse; the drug addict running from whatever complications have made life unbearable, retreating into a state of euphoric numbness sheltering his pain.

God made each one of us and has dreams for us all. Dreams that become unearthed and on display in heaven. Sometimes poets say it best, like Franz Wright in his poem, “Heaven”^[vii]:

I lived as a monster, my only
hope is to die like a child.
In the otherwise vacant
and seemingly ceilingless

vastness of a snowlit Boston

church, a voice
said: I
can do that—

if you ask me, I will do it
for you.

But if the new is to be born, the old must die. For the best to happen, the worst must stop happening—the worst we are and do to each other.

Yet perhaps it isn’t as difficult as it sounds. It was a hardened criminal close to death, who whispered, “Jesus, remember me,” which as it turned out was enough for the answer he just managed to hear was, “This day you will be with me in Paradise.”^[viii]

Will we recognize each other in heaven? Yes. Will we be the same—our relationships and bonds of affection? Better. Will there be intimacy and mutual support? Beyond our wildest dreams. Amen.

^[i] Franz Wright, “Prescience,” from *God’s Silence*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006) 75.

-
- [iii] Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973) 42.
- [iii] Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988) 64.
- [iv] Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Melody of Theology* (Cambridge: Harvard Press, 1988) 50.
- [v] *Ibid.*, 50.
- [vi] Peter S. Hawkins, notes from the 2007 Beecher Lectures, Yale Divinity School, 10.18.07.
- [vii] Franz Wright, "The Heaven," from *God's Silence*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006) 43.
- [viii] Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988) 64.