

“As It Is In Heaven”

When you are a minister you are asked a lot of questions that you cannot answer. The most difficult questions come from children because they see things so lucidly and have not yet learned to be subtle or political. The hardest questions come from my anyone who expects me to know things that I do not know. It is hard enough when a cat kills a bird without remorse and the bird lies there—definitely dead—to say anything wise. Of course I try; I ramble on about how that is just how cats are and bird heaven and spirit, which is a useless word when you are five years old or even fifty. Angels make more sense than spirit sometimes, but even I do not resort to bird angels.

So if I have trouble with birds (or hamsters or goldfish or any creature I have loved personally) you can imagine trying to field the questions about Nana or a grandson or an unborn baby The way I respond is the way most of us respond. The way most of us respond to most of this is to say” “Nana is in heaven.” But, because we live in a culture that will say anything—anything!—about sex but almost nothing about death we don’t really talk about what that means.

So here, on this day when we remember those who have died, are some thoughts about heaven. It is interesting, isn’t it, that we rarely really talk about what we call heaven; it is simply too incredible to imagine. When someone dies, we say: “he is at peace,” We say: “she is in a better place.” We say: “he is with the saints.” We say: “she is with the angels.” We say: “The Lord has called her home.” We consistently reassure each other with those words. We especially reassure children with those words. We drape our arm around our child and soothingly say: “Grandmother is in heaven.”

“Uncle Billy went to heaven to be with Jesus.” Words like that have been spoken, I am quite sure, millions of times. Words like that have been spoken as others nod in agreement.

The language and imagery of heaven is a part of our iconography, of what we heard in our homes, of what we heard in our churches, of what we sing, sing, sing. “Everybody’s talkin’ ‘bout heaven ain’t goin’ there.” We sing. “Heaven. Heaven. I’m gonna walk all over God’s heaven.” We sing. “*When the Roll is Called Up Yonder I’ll be There*” We sing. “*I wanna be among that number when the saints go marchin’ in.*” We sing.

Heaven as lyric is not limited to church. We can find heaven in rock and pop, in the country and on Broadway. There is that great theological treatise from the early ‘60’s appropriately named *Angel Baby* and sung by Rosie and the Originals. “It’s just like heaven bein’ here with you; you’re like an angel too good to be true.” Fred Astaire sings “Heaven, I’m in heaven, and my heart beats so that I can hardly speak...when we’re out together dancin’ cheek to cheek.” John Denver croons that West Virginia is *Almost Heaven*. A search of this topic turns up a seemingly endless list of songs that try to explain something by comparing it to heaven. We can understand that blissful feeling of love, whether it be for a person or a place. There’s *Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door*, *Stairway to Heaven*, *Heaven Knows and Thank Heaven for Little Girls*. There are hundreds and hundreds of heaven songs. Consider this: first, all of these lyrics simply accept the existence of heaven. Second, most of them use heaven to try to explain the unexplainable. What does it mean when we say: “*It’s just like heaven bein’ here with you.*” What are we trying to describe?

The poets do it too, poets like Emily Dickinson:

I don't know when --
Pray do not ask me how!
Indeed I'm too astonished
To think of answering you!
Going to Heaven!
How dim it sounds!
And yet it will be done
As sure as flocks go home at night
Unto the Shepherd's arm!

Perhaps you're going too!
Who knows?
If you should get there first
Save just a little space for me
Close to the two I lost --
The smallest "Robe" will fit me
And just a bit of "Crown" --
For you know we do not mind our dress
When we are going home --

Then there is *In Heaven* by Stephen Crane

In heaven,
Some little blades of grass
Stood before God.
"What did you do?"
Then all save one of the little blades
Began eagerly to relate
The merits of their lives.
This one stayed a small way behind,
Ashamed.
Presently, God said,
"And what did you do?"
The little blade answered, "Oh my Lord,
Memory is bitter to me,
For, if I did good deeds,
I know not of them."
Then God, in all His splendor,

Arose from His throne.
"Oh, best little blade of grass!" He said.

And Wordsworth simply wrote:

"Bliss it was to be alive,
but to be young was very heaven."

Now you can be sure that if an image is powerful and popular in poem and in song that it will be co-opted by advertisers. "*Chock Full of Nuts is that heavenly coffee.*" This bubble bath is heaven. This perfume is heaven. This cheesecake is heaven. This mattress is heaven. Pay attention. How many things does heaven seek to sell?

OK. Enough. You get the point. In song and poem and advertisements and the popular imagination there is a heaven. From "heaven help us" to "heavens to Betsy" to "for heaven's sake" there is a heaven. According to the Gallup poll there is a heaven. According to Renaissance paintings, Hallmark cards and angel costumes in the Christmas pageant there is a heaven. According to all the George Bush and Bill Clinton go to heaven jokes there is a heaven. According to all the Pope and President and lawyer going to heaven jokes there is a heaven. According to some folks there is a heaven for them and not for you and me. But here's the problem. When someone asks us to tell them what it really is the songs and poems and ads and angels and jokes and often misused Scriptures really mean we stutter. We shrug. We stumble.

We are much better at hell. We can see all kinds of terrible things; we can feel all kinds of horrible things. We can look at pictures of the holocaust. Rwanda. Darfur. Vietnam. Nagasaki. Katrina. Iraq. Afghanistan. Drug dens. Human trafficking. Child abuse. And even, hold your breath, corners of

America. Add what you choose to this list. It is easy to say: this is hell. We can point to moments in our own lives and say: this was hell. We can look at one man who might not see his children grow up and say: this is hell. We are good at hell. We have so much hell here that we, unlike many who lived before us, don't spend quite as much time wondering what eternal hell fire is like. We see images of hell every day

But heaven is harder. We want there to be a heaven. We need there to be a heaven. The heaven that we seek in those moments is not the heaven of song, poem, or heavenly coffee. The heaven we seek is the one that reassures us that all is well with the one we miss so much that our heart is on the floor. That is the heaven of Scripture. That is the heaven of: "By God most high maker of heaven and earth." (Genesis 1:14) "I am going to rain bread from heaven." (Exodus 16:4) "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!" (1 Kings 8:27) "Elijah is taken to heaven." (2 Kings 2) "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Matthew 3:2) "...and was carried up into heaven." (Luke 24:51) "O that you would rend the heavens and come down!" (Mark 1:9) "He said that this is not our life, but another, that which is in heaven." (Colossians 3) "So when a sinner repents, at that moment there is joy in heaven." (Luke 5) "Christ coming from heaven invites us to heaven." (Philippians 3) "But I pray to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven..." (Matthew 5: 44-45a) And then consider that we pray: "on earth as it is in heaven." In almost every case you can substitute the word God for heaven. And all of this reaches a magnificent crescendo when John, in his vision, sees a new heaven and a new earth.

But what do we believe? What do we imagine? Let's begin with what heaven is not. Heaven is not sitting on a cloud. Heaven is not about playing a harp although I am guessing that music is on the program. Heaven is not about being bored to death. Heaven is not about who won and who lost, who made it and who didn't. In fact, writes N. T. Wright: "It comes as something of a shock...when people are told...that there is very little in the Bible about 'going to heaven when you die' and not a lot about postmortem hell either....But the language of heaven in the New Testament doesn't work that way. God's kingdom in the preaching of Jesus refers not to postmortem destiny, not to our escape from this world into another one, but to God's sovereign rule coming 'on earth as it is in heaven.'"¹ This is surely not the heaven of popular culture not one that is easy to explain. This is not the heaven of Saint Peter at the gates with a checklist. This is not the heaven of cloud sitting. But this is a heaven about which we have questions.

Will I be with those I loved who have passed before me? Will I have this body? Will I feel the things I feel? Will I see famous people? Is there chocolate there? Is there great music and books and football? Will I be bored? We ask, of course, questions framed by our lives here, and, for that reason, most of those questions are completely irrelevant. Heaven is harder because it is beyond anything we can imagine. All I can tell you is what I believe. I believe that hell is eternal separation from God with no hope of that ever changing. That is hell. Heaven is to be in the presence of God. Heaven is to be with God. What that is like cannot be put into words so we resort to the trite, the maudlin, the commercial. Anything that we compare to heaven is not even close.

¹ N. T. Wright, *surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: Harper One, 2008), 51.

All I can say is this. This is what I believe. I believe that life does not end at death. I believe we are transformed. I believe that heaven starts when we follow Jesus now. I believe the Jesus story tells us how things turn out in the end. I believe that heaven is communal, diverse, inclusive. I believe that heaven is not what we have been sold. I believe that heaven starts now when we pray: “your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” I believe what N. T. Wright wrote:

For a start, *heaven* is actually a reverent way of speaking about God so that ‘riches in heaven’ simply means ‘riches in God’s presence’...heaven is the place where *God’s purposes for the future are stored up*. It isn’t where they are meant to stay so that one would need to go to heaven to enjoy them; it is where they are kept safe against the day when they will become reality on earth.”²

That is what we can do now. We can read N.T. Wright’s *Surprised by Hope*. We can not try to make a tragic situation anything other than what it is. We can not minimize the agony of those who grieve, just as we do not minimize the agony of the cross on which Jesus died. We will do this because we know that not all of the promises of glory in the world would entice us to leave the ones we love. And yet, as we try to be as honest as we can about the reality of the valley of the shadow we know that death is transformation. We know that there is agony and misery and grief; We also know that it ends. We know that there is a time of no more tears. We know that there will be a new heaven and a new earth. And we know:

“...God’s space and ours—heaven and earth, in other words—are, though very different, not far away from one another. Nor is talk about heaven simply a metaphorical way of talking about our own spiritual lives. God’s space and ours interlock and intersect in a whole variety of

² Ibid.

ways even while they retain, for the moment at least, their separate and distinct identities and roles. One day...they will be joined in a quite new way, open and visible to one another, married together forever...One day...Jesus will be present to us, and we to him, in a radically different way than we currently know.”³

And that is heaven.

Amen. Reverend Sharon Smith. The Gathering of Baltimore. November 1, 2020

³ Ibid, 116.