

Heaven: Mystery of Age to Come
Anniversary Sunday
Isaiah 65:17-25
November 17, 2019

One of the problems with growing up singing popular songs is that they stick in your head. All of a sudden, I find myself singing out loud, "Heaven, I'm in heaven, and the cares that hung around me through the week, simply vanish like a gamblers lucky streak, cause I'm out together dancing cheek to cheek." Sinatra does the best job with these lyrics although it is a well-known song from the 20's. Heaven in that song is a Saturday night at the dance, far away from all the cares of the week. There are hundreds of such songs in our popular culture.

So here we are celebrating 187 years of ministry at West Flamboro. Think about it, this faith community has been sharing the good news about Jesus for almost two centuries. Wow!! Imagine how many people this ministry has touched over these two centuries, thousands probably!

I read the history of the church put together by Velma. It was an interesting read! As captivating as the profiles of the clergy was, what was more fascinating to me were the stories of the missions to Mexico you went on, the photos of the congregation in 1975, the photos and celebrations of the 175th anniversary in 2007, and the various missions and groups who were dedicated to kingdom building West Flamboro has been engaged in since its beginnings in 1832.

So many of those saints are now with God in the heaven promised by preachers, Sunday school teachers, Youth leaders, musicians, and women's groups. What I'm asking is, what do you understand this word "heaven" to mean in the Christian faith?

For millions of people throughout the middle Ages and into the modern world it meant hope for a better world, and a release from the vale of tears through which most people were forced to pass. For such people the church offered a future life in heaven which they believed meant: peace, happiness, joy and no more death and decay.

Heaven was easier to believe in when we were young. We were much less cynical then. Like me you must remember those halcyon days of summer. We would lie in the field of grass looking up into the blue sky with the wispy white clouds passing over us and imagining all the things their shapes could become. We had no cares as young boys; our summer days were filled with play, adventure, and, best of all, freedom from adults. We enjoyed the stability and warmth of our homes, but true heaven was to be out there at the cliffs, the beaches, the woods, or the fields, running wild in the wind. Our world seemed full of harmony, apart from the occasional scrap with rivals, or conflict with parental authority. But in the main it was a sunny world. But alas, for us that world ended too quickly and heaven became increasingly difficult to find. So, where do we go now for our vision of heaven?

Our reading this morning in Isaiah provides a very different vision of heaven. Chapter 40 of Isaiah addressed the exiles in Babylon and offers them a vision of hope. It holds out the promise that they will return to their homeland and re-build their lives there. Many do return. But it doesn't go well. Famine, hardship, hostile enemies, and discouragement eat away at their dreams.

Book three of Isaiah, or chapters 56-66, engages this new situation of hopelessness and defeat. These chapters scold the leaders for their idolatry, for their moral and spiritual bankruptcy and their failure to put God at the center. But into this bleak situation God offers a new vision for the community, one of hope, reconciliation, and peace. You can almost hear the people ask the prophet, how can justice and peace be restored when all we experience is humiliation and defeat? Can you see the prophet close his eyes, sit silently for a few moments, and respond with these words we read this morning?

“For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.” (Isaiah 65:17)

Then follows that marvelous description of the new heaven and earth that ends with these words: *The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.*

In a strange way, millions of Christians, Jews and Muslims working for justice and peace in our world today, are acting out God's vision of heaven on earth. This vision of a new heaven and new earth inspires many to sacrifice themselves in the service of humanity. It is a vision that Jesus also called his followers to live out. This is not merely a vision for a people long ago, but for us today.

But like all prophetic visions we must push the envelope further. These words look beyond the struggles of Israel 400 years before Christ to a future world yet to come. It is a similar vision to that of John in the Apocalypse. There we read of a new heaven and earth replacing the current one.

Jesus too speaks of an end to the current order and the inauguration of the new realm in which God is at the center. He talks about the Son of Man coming as king in power and glory and then the end. This is a consistent message in Scripture.

What kind of world will this be? While the bible doesn't provide a clear, concrete profile of this other dimension, certain things are definite. What Jesus, Paul and the New Testament consistently affirm is that the resurrection of Jesus has guaranteed our future life in similar resurrected bodies as his. Indeed, in one place it says that when we see Jesus we will be like him. These new bodies we inherit will occupy space and, in my sometimes-vivid imagination, will find fulfillment in a new life together on a new planet in a new universe. Heaven will not be a body-less life. Our spirits will be reunited with our new bodies and return us to full identity as the persons we are, only now without sin. This is the promise of heaven.

But heaven in a real sense begins here on earth. The victory won by Jesus on the cross and confirmed by his resurrection, breaks into our present age through the Spirit. The presence of the Spirit in each Christian and in each gathered Christian Community is a sign of the world to come. Each person of faith, consciously or unconsciously, acts out the life of God's Spirit where they live, work and play and worship. This life force comes to us from a future age, what the bible calls "heaven". Jesus talks about this breaking in of this future age in language that speaks of God's reign coming near. Heaven is never

portrayed in Scripture as merely a future time or place, but also as a present reality for believers.

Now who can believe this? Surely those of us mature, sophisticated people of the 21st century is beyond this kind of superstitious mumbo jumbo of heaven and future life? Are we? Let me be so bold as to remind us that today people are generally willing to believe almost anything. We seem to be just as superstitious as our medieval ancestors. Indeed, I suggest that the most fitting label for our time is “the age of credulity”. People are willing to believe the craziest things today: astrology is popular; one in seven North Americans regularly consult fortune-tellers; candle sales have skyrocketed because of the growing belief of aromatherapy; half the U.S. population believes in necromancy or bringing up the dead; the result of the last American election, if it proves anything at all, shows that reality is not necessarily based on facts and logic.

My sense today is that heaven is still an idea lying below the surface in popular culture. It's true that many no longer believe in the virgin birth, the resurrection or eternal life through Jesus. I remember my mother saying at my father's funeral that beyond the grave only silence and nothingness waits. As I stared into the dark grave my father was lowered into, I couldn't help think how meaningless life would be if that were true. It's true that for many “heaven” is limited to what we can gain from this life on earth. But for me, as a Christian, Isaiah's vision tied to the vision of the New Testament is a much more compelling and satisfying idea than I can find in our post Christian culture. Let no one imagine that we have moved beyond faith. While Isaiah's vision is no longer believed, this doesn't mean we believe in nothing. On the contrary, as the famous G. K. Chesterton once said, “alas the truth is worse. They believe in anything.”

So what do we believe? How does Isaiah and Jesus' vision of heaven breaking into our world with powerful effect shape our lives? And how does that inform our ethics, our relationships, our priorities and goals?

Yes, Sinatra's lyrical voice still echoes in my head but I no longer think of heaven as an escape from the cares that come to my door. Heaven is rather a vision of a reality that God has brought into my life

though the Spirit's transforming power. Heaven, as Jesus promised, has come near in him. Heaven is the world to come that has broken into our present through his person. This other dimension of which Isaiah and Jesus speak is just as real as the physical world we encounter every moment.

Is this true for you?

Amen