

Down to Earth

A sermon preached by the Rev. Tom Buchanan on May 16, 2021
Friendship Presbyterian Church

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

“See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them;

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.”

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.” 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. Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children.” (Revelation 21:1-7, NRSV)

I would imagine that many of us first asked tough questions of life and its meaning, and of the value of faith, when faced with a great loss. As some of you know, for me it was the loss of my granddaddy, my mother’s father. I had just turned nine years old.

In my adulthood, I would learn that he really was a flesh-and-blood human being – just like me – who didn’t really ride a white stallion. But to me as a young boy, he was perfect. In a way, he always will be. The loss was devastating, and I cried and cried for a long time afterwards. But what got me through it was what my mother said, that one day I would see him again, in Heaven ... that that’s where he is now, and that he doesn’t have cancer anymore ... that he doesn’t hurt anymore ... and that one day, you, Tom, will die, but when you do, you too will go there to be with God and Jesus and granddaddy, and live forever surrounded by their love.

The pain didn’t go away, but the thought of going to Heaven one day somehow made it OK. Of course, that comfort didn’t make all my questions suddenly disappear (as no one really had good answers for them):

- What will we look like in Heaven? Will a child who dies be a child in Heaven? Will an old person who dies be an old person? Will we have wings like angels?
- Will my dog Eagle go to Heaven when she dies?

- What will we *do* in Heaven? Visit with loved ones all day? Talk with Jesus? Sing hymns? Play harps?

As I got a little older I realized that whatever Heaven was like, it was not understood to be automatic. That is to say, there *was* an alternative, but you really didn't want to go *there*. In fact, that's what Christianity and church and Jesus and God were all about – so that people could be saved from *having* to go there, seeing as – I would learn – we all had a sin problem that would send us there unless we accepted Jesus as our Savior. I would learn that *that* was the reason Jesus came to earth, so that instead of going where our sins would send us, we could instead go to Heaven and be with Jesus and all those who have loved and trusted him through the ages.

The message I heard was that getting “saved” and going to Heaven one day was the whole point.

Well, isn't it? Isn't getting to Heaven ultimately why we're here? I mean, if Heaven is not the great pay-off, then why do we do any number of things? ☺ But seriously, why *bother* with a life of faith if it's *not*? True, we may not talk about it all the time – we *are* Presbyterians after all, and don't get too worked up worrying about it. But all our lives we've heard people say that “salvation” ... “being saved” ... is what it's all about.

We Presbyterians are less likely to pound that language than others, but it's probably more an issue of style than substance. Whether we emphasize it or not, most of us have always assumed that the most important reason for being a Christian is to assure one's salvation, to be “saved” – and that being saved is about going to Heaven when you die. It's simple. It's what we all learned in Sunday School. It's comforting and re-assuring.

But what if making this “the point” of Christian faith is to *miss* something very important? What if there is so much more to the purpose and reality of Christian faith and life than this?

There's a wonderful scene in that classic movie “The Princess Bride” in which the Sicilian villain Vizzini has tried cutting the rope which is hanging over the cliff, in order to kill the Man in Black, the hero, who was trying to climb up to rescue the Princess. But it didn't work, for the Man in Black managed to cling onto the cliff's face and now is miraculously hanging on. Vizzini looks over the cliff and sees that the hero is still alive, and yells out, “He didn't fall?! INCONCEIVABLE!!” To which one of his henchmen, the Spaniard Inigo Montoya (who later becomes a good guy) brilliantly responds, “You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.”

The word “salvation” is like that. It's a multi-layered concept in the Bible. Whatever else it is, it can't be reduced to a simple catchphrase or a “sinners' prayer.” What many commonly mean by it (that salvation means “going to heaven when we die”) is *not* untrue, but it *is* incomplete, obscuring rather than illuminating the rich Biblical meanings of the idea. For example, it might be interesting to ponder the fact that a robust afterlife concept did not even emerge until

nearly the end of the writing of the Old Testament. Almost all the centuries of Biblical times, the people of God didn't really even *believe* in a life after this life. Stop for a moment to consider what that means: the hope of "going to Heaven" could not possibly have been their motive for taking God seriously. And yet, they often thought and spoke about "salvation".

"Salvation" is a rich, holistic word that encompasses ideas such as safety, care, provision, rescue, and healing. God's salvation was evident in God's people being set free from slavery, being brought home from exile. It was seen in physical and spiritual sustenance in the midst of a desert, and in blessings to the faithful. It was light in darkness, sight to the blind, understanding to the simple. It was peace to those threatened by war. It was forgiveness and restoration for those lost in guilt and shame. It was comfort for the grieving, healing for the sick, new life for those whose life seemed spent.

Salvation was understood as *wholeness*, and because human wholeness is never merely a personal matter but also a communal one, salvation was never just a personal matter, but a *social* reality. God's salvation was experienced wherever oppression was overcome by peace and justice, wherever insults to human dignity were overcome by compassion and the lifting up of the poor. Most importantly, the primary sphere of salvation was understood to be *this* life and *this* world, seeing as there was so much in this life, this world, that needed saving. So much *still* needs saving.

By the time of Jesus' ministry, two centuries after the end of the writing of the Old Testament, a majority of the Jewish people had come to believe in an afterlife – a belief rooted in the experience of injustice, and in squaring suffering and martyrdom with their deep faith in the love and justice of God. And there is no question but that Jesus believed in a life beyond this life, but he didn't talk about it very much. Most often in the gospels, the subject is brought up by someone else, and when Jesus does address it, it's often unclear whether he is actually providing information about it or is actually subverting overly confident notions of what it will be like.

In any case, the afterlife doesn't seem to be his primary interest – though all through the gospels, he is *very much* interested in *salvation*, which he addresses through what is clearly his central message: the coming of the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Heaven. Biblically, they mean the same thing.

But there's a problem. Most Christians assume that what Jesus means when he speaks of the Kingdom in the gospels is of a place you (hopefully) go when you *die*. But when we understand the deep roots of the idea in the Hebrew prophets, it has far more to do with our lives in *this* world than with something beyond this life. That's not to say that it doesn't embrace that "beyond", but only that it embraces so much more too ... so much more that is right at hand.

This point is hidden in plain view in a prayer which we say every Sunday, some of us every day ... one which we will pray in a few minutes – The Lord's Prayer: "Our Father / who art in Heaven / hallowed be thy name / thy Kingdom come / thy will be done / on Earth as it is in Heaven ..."

When we say the prayer, we break up the phrases the way we do for cadence and flow purposes. But something gets obscured by our doing that. Now while I'm not suggesting that we should start saying it differently, the way we say it *does* make it a little harder truly to listen to ourselves and to hear exactly what it is that we're praying!

When you say it without that concern for cadence, and simply pray it thought for thought, something emerges ... "Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven ..."

Do you hear it? Every time we pray this, we pray – not to fly off to the Kingdom – but *for the Kingdom to come here* – which means God's will being done *here*, being manifest *here*. The Kingdom is the reign of God – the healing, liberating, freedom-giving work of God – which we long to see manifest in *this* world and *this* life!

I certainly grew up with the impression that the *entire point* of Jesus' life and message is to get us from earth to Heaven. But as I've gotten older I've become convinced that his message is much less about how to get from earth to Heaven, and much more about getting Heaven down to earth ... more of Heaven *into* the earth ... opening our eyes and hearts to see and receive God's salvation in the healing, liberating work of the Spirit in *this* world and *this* life ... setting people free and bringing them together into alternative communities of hope.

Isn't *this* actually what the Revelation passage teaches us too? It's so easy to read those strange, poetic words – the "New Jerusalem" – as referring to a celestial place beyond the clouds and the stars. But recall that the New Jerusalem comes "*down out of heaven from God*", the loud voice from the throne then saying that "the home of God is among mortals", that now *God will dwell with them!* This is the *Dream of God* – but this Dream is not of – or for – some other-worldly reality. It is a Dream for *this* world, which calls us to live into it by *being fully awake in this world*, committing hands and hearts to work to realize it, even if never fully.

The hymn that we will sing at the end of this service – "O Holy City, Seen of John" – expresses this truth beautifully: "*Give us, O God, the strength to build the city that has stood too long a dream, whose laws are love, whose ways are servant-hood, and where the sun that shines becomes God's grace for human good. Already in the mind of God that city rises fair. Lo, how its splendor challenges the souls that greatly dare, and bids us seize the whole of life and build its glory there.*"

At its heart, our faith would not have us focus our attention on something we don't and can't grasp beyond this world, or still less have us waste our richest imaginative energies on how to *escape* this world. Rather, our faith would send us back *into* the world with new strength and courage.

But our faith *does* teach us that there is more still. We have come full circle. Our lives of faith are meant to be full and wholly committed to the call before us, here and now, but for us all, in

time, the evening comes. And we can't but think of those who have gone before us, who have lived, who have run their race, and who have completed their earthly journeys. Is there more? What of our hope for life beyond this life – for Heaven, for the Resurrection? What will it look like? What will it feel like?

Well, I'm a preacher, and so I'm supposed to tell you the truth. And the truth is, *I don't know*. There have been many faithful people through the centuries who have had many different ways of imagining what awaits us. The language used in the New Testament to describe the mystery of eternal life is full of imagery, richly symbolic and metaphorical – but metaphorical for *what* is not really possible to say. Here we have to acknowledge our ignorance, and resist the temptation to think we know more than we do, even if it would bring us comfort to do so.

That said, in the midst of so many unknowns, there are two things of which I am certain:

First, that when we consider the final meaning and value of a life, we are talking about something that is finally in the hands of God. We were created by God ... we live in the presence of God ... we live, move and have our being in God. And when the day comes that we die, we don't die into Nothing ... we die into God.

Secondly, and just as importantly, whatever new life may await us, it is not something that in any way negates the value and preciousness of this one life we know, but *completes* and *fulfills* it ... forever sanctifying whatever in this life we have known as good and true and beautiful, and inscribing the names of all those people, places, and moments on Heaven's face with letters of fire.

Of course, as when I was a young boy, so now – my own questions still linger. My mind turns to granddaddy and all those I've loved and to whom I've had to say goodbye. But for all that we might speculate about, it seems to me that the truest testimony and homage to these beloved saints is a life in this world faithfully and passionately lived. As the poet Mary Oliver would ask us, "What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

May we live these precious days we have with passion ... planting the seeds of Heaven in the earth. And when the shadows finally fall on us, and we face the greatest Mystery of all, may we experience the grace of letting go. May we then entrust our own lives and the lives of those we have loved to the One who inspired them all, strengthened them all, and loved them all to the end – and into a new beginning. To the glory of God. Amen.