

“Is Heaven All It’s Cracked Up To Be?”
Isaiah 65:17-25
Revelation 21:1-4, 21-25

This sermon request came in the form of a question, “Is heaven all it’s cracked up to be?” First we must ask another question – “what is heaven cracked up to be?”

Here's one way. Look and listen...

My Heaven

Composed and Sung by Mary Chapin Carpenter
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Nothing shatters nothing breaks
Nothing hurts and nothing aches
We get ourselves one heck-of-a place in my heaven
Looking down at the world below,
a bunch of whining, fighting schmo's
Up here we got none of those, in my heaven.

There's pools and lakes and hills and mountains
Music, art, and lighted fountains
Who needs bucks here, no one's counting,
in my heaven.
No one works, we all just play,
we pick the weather everyday
If you change your mind, that's OK, in my heaven
Grandma's up here, grandpa too
In a condo with to-die-for views
There's presidents and movie stars,
you just come as you are
No one's lost and no one's missing
No more partings just hugs and kissing
And all these stars are just for wishing,
in my heaven

There's little white lights everywhere
Your childhood dog in Dad's old chair
And more memories than my heart can hold
When Eva's singing “Fields of Gold”

There's neighbors, thieves and long lost lovers,
villains, poets, kings and mothers
Up here we forgive each other, in my heaven
For every soul that's down there waiting
holding on, still hesitating
We say a prayer of levitating, in my heaven

You can look back on your life and lot
But it can't matter what you're not
By the time you're here, we're all we've got,
in my heaven
in my heaven
in my heaven

So ... is heaven all it's cracked up to be? The most honest answer would be, "how would I know – I've never been there!" In reading up on the subject, I was amazed at how much some people claim to know so much about heaven. One writer describes heaven by answering definitively 35 frequently asked questions about heaven!ⁱ St. Paul who had such a mystical experience of God that he could only describe it as being "**caught up to the third heaven ... caught up into Paradise..**"ⁱⁱ but later wrote, "**There [I] heard the unspeakable spoken, but was forbidden to tell what [I] heard.**"ⁱⁱⁱ So we are left with "**what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor human heart conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.**"^{iv}

I must confess I have done little preaching about heaven. I've never been concerned with the "furniture of heaven." Indeed, I believe Christianity has become skewed over the centuries with its preoccupation about getting into heaven. As a result, Christianity often resembles a religion of rules and regulations – what we must do or not do, what we must believe or not believe, in order to get into heaven. Salvation has become so narrowly defined as getting into heaven when we die. Then we argue about who's saved and who's not and which church offers the surest track to salvation. The focus is on getting out of this world rather than learning how to live, really live, in it. Didn't God send Jesus into the world because God loved the world so very much?^v Jesus began his ministry not by preaching, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is in outer space." Rather, "**Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.**"^{vi} Jesus came that we might have life, life in all of its fullness.^{vii}

Hell-bent as we are in rejecting God's vision for human life, we respond to Jesus' offer of life by hanging him on a cross, but you can't bury love in a tomb forever. On Easter morning we discover just how tenacious is God's love for us. In his life, death and resurrection, I hear Jesus saying,

God's love is from everlasting to everlasting. Don't be anxious about tomorrow, don't worry about life after death. God will not stop loving you on the day you die. Trust me! Let's refocus on this good world that God created and let's learn to live under God's rule. My business is about creating new heavens and a new earth. On Sunday evenings you watch Extreme Makeover: Home Edition. You "ain't" seen anything yet. "**The home of God is among mortals.**" See how God's love can transform your life. Won't you join me in getting this good news out to the world?

Over the centuries, people have viewed heaven almost as a piece of real-estate. We talk about looking up to heaven because that's the language of the Bible. But the Biblical concept of the universe was that of a 3-story universe – there's earth with heaven above and hell below. Ever since Copernicus, what was up is now down and what was down is now up. If he didn't convince you of that, the world of astronauts and satellites should.

Heaven is not about geography but the presence of God. The metaphors we use make us forget that. We sang a moment ago, "On heaven's blissful shore, his goodness we'll adore."^{viii} Every time I sing that hymn I think of the time when our children were young and we camped along the shore of Myrtle Beach. Since Lucy was always sweeping sand out of the camper, she defined heaven as a beach with astroturf!

There's a book that was published this month with a most intriguing title: *The Geography of Bliss: One Grump's Search for the Happiest Places in the World*. Maybe the author is looking for a little heaven on earth. That has some possibilities for we can have tastes of heaven in this life. We say, for example, that when we come to the Lord's Table, we have a foretaste of the heavenly banquet.^{ix} We may not know much, if anything, about heaven, but when we are open to God's presence we begin to see the world as God meant it to be. Who of us would want to say we can experience God's presence only on the other side of the grave? **And this is the real and eternal life: That they know you, The one and only true God, And Jesus Christ, whom you sent**" prayed Jesus.^x And he was referring to the present moment, not some distant future time.

Heaven in its fullness is a totally new dimension unknown to any of us who still walk this earth. **"For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known."**^{xi}

The passage from Isaiah has become a favorite of mine. It is a picture of the world as God intended it to be and is once again leading it to be, wherever and in whatever dimension. Barbara Brown Taylor has a helpful comment about the passage.

This was Isaiah's vision of salvation, which all kinds of people have turned into a vision of heaven. While Isaiah might have agreed that salvation comes from heaven, I doubt he would ever have agreed to leave it there. As far as the Hebrew Bible is concerned, heaven is only interesting insofar as it comes to earth. Salvation is not about earthlings going up but about heaven coming down, and any notion of salvation that does not include just rulers, honest judges, an equitable economy, and peace among the nations, would have made Isaiah scratch his head.^{xii}

You may have noticed some similarities between Isaiah's vision and the lyrics of Mary Chapin Carpenter – heaven is about life as it should be. The major difference between Mary's song and the Bible is that she sings about *my heaven*. It's quite self-centered. The Biblical vision "sings" about justice – people living in right relationship with God and neighbor and all creation.

Mary sings, "No one works, we all just play, we pick the weather everyday..." I hope not. That doesn't sound very heavenly to me. Now that I will soon become a Florida retiree, I must remember the lesson I learned from working among them those many years – the happiest and longest living retirees were not those who just played all day. As I observed, the happiest were those who were actively involved in their church and community. Whatever else heaven may be or not be, it is not about endless games of golf or bridge. At least I hope not. That sounds like hell to me!

So, too, would the idea of endless church services! In his great vision, John couldn't find any

temple in the heavenly city. There simply is no need for the church. Make no mistake, this side of heaven in all of its fullness, we still need the church. A young woman who was examined for ordination to ministry by Philadelphia Presbytery this past Tuesday. Her statement of faith declared “the church must love God without distraction and love our neighbors without category or distinction.” That’s one reason why we need to gather as the Christian community. In this life, there is so much that distracts us in loving God with heart, soul, mind and strength. We need to gather together for worship and nurture, to help each other focus our lives where they should be. And the church is the one place in the world where we are called to love without distinction – **“In Christ's family there can be no division into Jew and non-Jew, slave and free, male and female. Among us you are all equal. That is, we are all in a common relationship with Jesus Christ.”**^{xiii}

When the kingdom of heaven breaks in with all its fullness, we won’t need light to illumine us because we will all live in the light God. We won’t need Sunday School or youth programs. **“No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.”** Why? **“Because [God’s] law will be written on their hearts...”**^{xiv}

In the Bible there are several metaphors for heaven. One that I appreciate more and more is that of the heavenly city. I confess that I’m a city slicker. I always wanted to live for at least one year in Manhattan. The closest I’ve come to that is Ambler, about 16 miles from Philadelphia. In my annual report I share just how much I’ve enjoyed living in this area. According to the Revelation, heaven is like a city. That thought might make some of you run home and lock your doors. A contemporary hymn writer explains way:

Our cities, Lord, wear shrouds of pain;
Beneath our gleaming towers of wealth
The homeless crouch in rain and snow,
The poor cry out for strength and health.
Youth’s hope is dimmed by ignorance;
Unwilling, workers idled stand;
Indifference walks unheeding by
As hunger stretches out its hand.^{xv}

In contrast, John heard a voice thunder from the Throne – **“Look! Look! God has moved into the neighborhood, making his home with men and women! They're his people, he's their God. He'll wipe every tear from their eyes. Death is gone for good—tears gone, crying gone, pain gone – all the first order of things gone.”**^{xvi}

If country living is more to your liking, don’t worry. Remember, the city is only a metaphor, one among several. Heaven is not about any of your negative images of urban life, heaven is about relationships restored – not just with your immediate family but with all God’s children.

There’s an old Jewish legend in which a group of rabbis have a vision of Hell. What they saw before them was a sumptuous banquet table set with all sorts of delicious foods and plenty of wine. Seated at the table were many people who were obviously hungry and desirous of enjoying the tasty meal which had been prepared for them. But these people could not eat the food because they had splints on their arms. They were able to reach the food but could get none of it from the

table to their mouths because the splints prevented them from bending their arms.

Next, the rabbis had a vision of Heaven, which depicted a scene much like the first. There was a banquet table complete with a sumptuous feast, and at table sat many people with their arms in splints. But there was one difference: These people had learned how to share the food and feed each other.

Is heaven all that it's cracked up to be? I suspect that heaven is more, much more, than it's cracked up to be.

Endnotes

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- i. *Tough Questions People Ask*, Peter Kreeft (©2003 Christianity Today)
 - ii. 2 Corinthians 12:2-4
 - iii. 2 Corinthians 12:3 (*The Message*)
 - iv. 1 Corinthians 2:9
 - v. John 3:16
 - vi. Matthew 4:17
 - vii. John 10:10
 - viii. *Come, Christians, Join to Sing*, #150 Presbyterian Hymnal
 - ix. *Confession of 1967*, Book of Confessions, 9.52
 - x. John 17:3 (*The Message*)
 - xi. 1 Corinthians 13:12
 - xii. "Easter Preaching and the Lost Language of Salvation" in *Journal for Preachers*, Vol. XXV, No. 3.)
 - xiii. Galatians 3:28 (*The Message*)
 - xiv. See Jeremiah 31:31-34
 - xv. Joy F. Patterson, 1988 - #431 *Presbyterian Hymnal*
 - xvi. Revelation 21:3-4 (*The Message*)