

“Heavenly Hope”

WORDS of FAITH: Contentment

Matthew 5:3-10 and Revelation 7:9-17

All Saints’ Sunday, November 5, 2017

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Madison WI

Rev. Charlie Berthoud

Jesus offered blessings to all sorts of people, making a focused effort to include those who were too often forgotten or ignored, like the hungry and sick, like the meek and the mourners. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

This comfort comes in many forms, including the promise of a future with God, the hope of heaven.

Our understanding of heaven is shaped by a variety of Scripture passages. For today, we hear from the book of Revelation, the last and perhaps the most dramatic book of the Bible.

Presbyterians generally avoid the literalistic interpretations of this text, seeing it symbolically in the context of the first century, as a message of hope in a time of chaos and persecution. And in this symbolic language, we learn about God.

Our reading in Revelation 7 paints a picture of an endless number of people standing before God in the future, coming from all over the world. They are offering praise and singing songs. We learn that they have come through a great ordeal, and that soon there will be a time of no more hunger, of abundant springs of water, and of tears being wiped away.

Listen for God’s word.

⁹After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

“Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

¹¹And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹²singing,

“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honor
and power and might
be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

¹³Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” ¹⁴I said to him, “Sir, you are the one that knows.” Then he

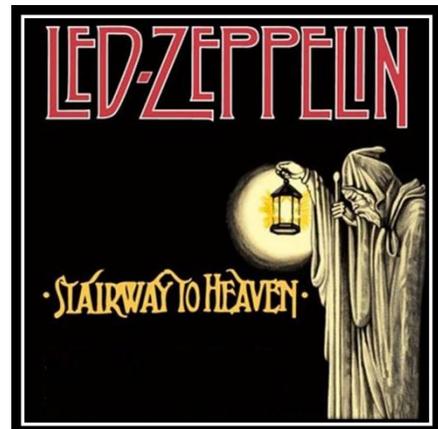
said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

¹⁵ For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.

¹⁶ They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat;

¹⁷ for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

What's your image of heaven? From classical artwork such as Italian Renaissance painter Fra Angelico to contemporary popular artist Thomas Kinkaide, to classic rockers Led Zeppelin, we have a lot of food for thought to think about heaven.



The variety of heavenly imagery in history and culture reflects the variety that we read in Scripture: a house with many rooms, a place for the righteous, a destination for those who do God's will. But there is nothing definitive.

The New Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible, a five volume, well respected scholarly work, has an entry on heaven concludes by noting that our images for heaven continue to evolve to this day.

In other words, we don't know for certain what heaven is actually like.

While Hollywood and certain religious traditions like to focus on the negative portraits of some sort of hell, in Scripture, we see an overwhelming message of grace and mercy and inclusion. And this message gives us hope, as we face the inevitable sad reality of death.

In our reading for today, we have "a great multitude that no one can count, from every nation"

In John 3 we read that God so loved the world that he sent the son to save the world

In Psalm 103 and many other places, we learn that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

In the little book of Titus, which we sometimes hear on Christmas Eve, we learn that the grace of God appeared, bringing salvation to all.

So we don't know exactly what heaven is or what it will be like, and I'm OK with that, because I believe in the power of God's love.

On this All Saints Day, this somber day, when we light candles and read names (and use a lot of tissues!), we take hope in the promise of God, that nothing—

not life, nor death, or nor anything else in all creation—can separate us from the love of God.

We have this hope as Christians and we can have this hope for the whole world, for everyone, knowing that God’s grace and mercy are bigger than we can imagine.

But that’s not all. Along with the heavenly hope of God’s grace and mercy, there is one more reason for us to be hopeful.

My brother John died suddenly ten years this fall. It was probably the worst day of my life. As with any death, the sadness lessens with time, but I still miss him.

At his memorial service, we sang the classic gospel spiritual “I’ll Fly Away.” It’s a beautiful song, talking about flying away to God’s celestial shores. One verse says

Just a few more weary days and then, I'll fly away
To a land where joys will never end, I'll fly away

I listened to several different artists’ versions this week. I really like the versions by Jars of Clay, Johnny Cash, and Alison Kraus.

Over the years “I’ll Fly Away” has given comfort to millions of people, especially oppressed and hurting people. I know it gave me comfort at the time of John’s death. Whenever I hear it, I think of him.

But as wonderful as the song is, it misses an important element of what the Bible teaches about heaven—that heaven isn’t exclusively a far-away place or simply an escape from this world.

In many places, the Bible teaches us that God's intention is heaven here on earth. The book of Revelation ends with a vision of earth and heaven coming together, with God's will being done here on earth.

Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God, right here and now, and invited people to follow him into this Kingdom, to live a new reality.

We pray week after week and day after day: Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

God seems intent on renewing and restoring creation, on making all things new here on earth.

In his delightful book called *LOVE WINS: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*, author and preacher Rob Bell has a chapter about the idea that God's intention is for heaven to be among us. The chapter is called "Here is the New There." He writes:

Jesus invites us, in this life
In this broken, beautiful world
To experience the life of heaven now.
He insisted over and over that God's peace, joy, and love
Are currently available to us, exactly as we are.

So at the end of worship today, we're singing a hymn, to the tune of "I'll Fly Away" but with words about God's desire to transform and redeem this world, here and now.

Our task and calling, even in our grief, is to do what we can to transform and redeem ourselves and the world around us.

Jesus came into this world to offer peace and hope and strength

to people who mourn,
to people who are hurting,
to people who are lost.

So in the face of death and sadness and pain,

we can be peaceful and hopeful and strong—

because of the promise of a heavenly future

and because of God's never-ending love.

Amen.