

Heaven

John 14:1-7

Rev. 21:1-6

In his autobiography, the late, great Reverend Billy Graham tells a story about when he was a young man and just starting out at a small, rural church. He had just moved into his house, and he wanted to get a letter in the mail for his parents to tell them he was there, and all was well. And yes, this was 1940 or so- the age of old fashioned 'snail mail'. He wanted to get the letter off quickly, so he set out to walk the short distance to the post office downtown. However, he soon realized that he did not know exactly where the post office was. He stopped and asked a young boy where the post office was. The young boy told him. Then the boy asked Reverend Graham who he was. Billy Graham said: *"Why I am the new pastor in town, and I am going to show you how to get to heaven!"* The young lad thought for a moment and then said: *"How are you going to show me the way to heaven when you don't even know the way to the Post Office?"*

Heaven: We do not hear about what heaven is and I am wondering why. References to heaven abound in our liturgy. Heaven is a part of our most common prayer. Every week we pray: *"Our Father who is in heaven..."* Both the Apostles' Creed and Nicene Creed refer to heaven. The Apostles' Creed says: *"I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth."* Jesus *"ascends into heaven"*. Later it refers to *"the life everlasting."* The Nicene Creed says: *"We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come."*

Despite these frequent references, I suggest we really do not think about heaven as much as we should. I think heaven could- and should- be a source of comfort, hope and inspiration for us all. We hear about

heaven at a funeral, but that is about it. I do not think it should be that way. It was not always that way. Many older churches had a cemetery right next to the church. It was a constant reminder of what was to happen here on earth-and beyond the earth. If Green Valley is God's waiting room, how long do we have to wait? *Do you wonder what is behind the next door?*

Times have changed. The cemeteries are in out of the way places. We have a columbarium that is out of the public view. I was a member here for a year before I knew where it was! We live longer than in the past. Modern life is comfortable and good. We eat well and have more channels on Cox cable than we need. Unlike days gone by, we do not feel the need to think of 'a better place.' We live well and I am glad. We feel we should be concerned about what is happening now and not in the 'sweet by and by' as my grandmother said. Most sermons deal with the social gospel, mission, and personal faith improvement. These are very important concerns. We as Christians must live in the here and now. Social issues are important, and we must take a moral stand on the issues of our day. Hungry people need to be fed. Immigrants need to be cared for. We support those missions here at VPC. I am glad about that too.

However, the same percentage of us die. Our grandparents die. Our parents die. Our friends begin to leave us. We go to the doctor with fear and trembling. How many of us will be here in fifteen years?

And some of you have known a ***grief I can scarcely imagine***, losing a husband, a wife or even a child. You are the real saints of the faith. We all could use a little reflection on heaven from time to time. So today I want to speak **words of comfort** to you about a uniquely Christian

belief: the heavenly kingdom of Jesus Christ. Yes, I want to talk about heaven. This is our ultimate destination, and we can and should take comfort in the promise of heavenly life with for us and with those who have gone before us and are with Jesus. **Heaven is for real, and it is a good place.**

In Revelation 21, John was writing to little groups of persecuted first century Christians amid the Roman Empire. For Roman citizens on top, life was good. Everything, taxes, revenues, and profits were channeled upward. There was peace because Caesar ruled with an iron fist. There were wars, but they were kept to the fringes of empire. The Christians of this period were a hunted group and the future looked bleak or at least uncertain. Persecution, murder, and death were frequent occurrences. All the 'original' twelve apostles were dead except John the author of Revelation. Where was Jesus' promised return? When was he coming back? What was to happen to those fellow Christians who experienced martyrdom? Was there any hope?

Against this worldly view, Revelation describes the Empire of heaven. Revelation can be confusing because John used a lot of figurative language in it. Confusing as the language is, this difficulty should not keep us from seeking comfort and hope in the picture of heaven that is found in this scripture. Revelation says that the empires of this world will eventually die. **"Then I saw 'a new heaven and a new earth,' for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea." (21:1)** Verse five says that **"all things will be made new again."** That means us as well. We will be made new. That means those who went before us will be made new as well. In this New Kingdom instead of oppression, greed, materialism, and sadness the text tells us that **"God will wipe every tear from their eyes."** You have

wept at the loss of a loved one? The day is coming in heaven when **“Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away. Heaven is a place where God gives freely from the spring of the water of life. The gates are always open by day and there is no night.”**

How else does John describe heaven? Elsewhere in John’s writings he describes **heaven as a wedding banquet**. There is food for all, a great feast for all the people. It will be the food that brings *eternal life*, and everyone will share. All races and people from every country will be there at the banquet.

In the **Kingdom of Heaven**, there is no military might but there is *security*. It is Christ who defends, not our superpower armies. We will find the security and union of enduring love. There is family. There is *peace*-but not just the kind of peace we get from the absence of war, but the kind of love that you have for brothers, sisters, parents, and others. This is the kind of love that _____ read to us earlier from John 13:34; 35: *“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.” (NIV)*. This world will indeed know we are Christians by that kind of love. In the next world-*that is the New Kingdom*-this kind of love will be practiced by all. And unlike Rome or any other superpower, God’s Kingdom of Heaven-this Empire of love- will last forever. It will never change.

My late uncle, Dr. William Ramsay told me that Revelation is not just about the future; it is also about the church here and now. There is a heaven beyond, but there is the church, Christ’s bride, here and now. We are –in his words-to be a *“little colony of heaven in the kingdom of*

this world.” The doors to this kingdom are also always open. This little kingdom of love, faith, acceptance and understanding exists here and now at VPC in Green Valley. There is a banquet here next week and on the first Sunday of every month that we call Communion or the Lord’s Supper. All are welcome. This is not to mention the countless pot-luck dinners we have here as well. And yes, there will be potlucks in heaven too. Some of you that have experienced sorrow know that God does wipe away tears-at least a little bit- through Valley Presbyterian. That is a little heaven on earth. We have a love here at this church that is unlike any I have known anywhere. We care for each other in a way that is incredibly special. That is a little slice of heaven too. We experience glimpses of heaven in all our missions that help others and through our fellowships that feed our souls at VPC. Heaven all the while is shining on and through us to the world.

Let me end this. What will we be like in heaven? Well, we will still be ourselves, recognizably ourselves. Whatever else the resurrection of the body means, it surely means that. I will know you and you will know me! You will see and recognize those from your family who have gone before you. I will see my grandparents again and get to meet Maureen’s Dad for the first time and she will meet my Dad as well. There will be many glorious reunions of all kinds! **Say Amen? Amen!**

I may have raised more questions than answers this morning, but my goal today was not to definitively say what heaven is going to be like. I do not know what heaven will be like other than what the scriptures say. My goal today has been to get you to think and be hopeful about a promise of something that is truly out of this world. It is exciting to think about, isn’t it? It is a comfort, isn’t it?

What I have tried to do today is to offer some comfort and hope for all of us. Heaven is a beautiful place and living for eternity with Jesus is a glorious thought and reality. All we really need to know about heaven is that our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, will be there. Have faith and walk on. He is there waiting and preparing a room for us all! We will see Him face-to-face.

How do you get to heaven?

Jesus said: ***“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”***

Now you know. The best is yet to come! Take comfort in that promise. It cannot be taken from you. If I lose everything else in life, this cannot be taken from either me or you.

“The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s people. Amen.”

Say AMEN!