

“Heaven on Earth”

**Pastor Dave Carlson
First Presbyterian Church
Sunday, May 5, 2013**

Old Testament Lesson – Psalm 23

New Testament Lesson – Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5

A woman of immense wealth dreamed she went to heaven and was met by the angel Gabriel, who gave her a tour of the celestial city. First, she saw a lavish estate that belonged to her former maid. Then Gabriel showed her a mansion, where her former chauffeur lived.

Finally, Gabriel gave her a sneak preview of her home; it was a shack behind the maid’s palace. Taken aback, the woman protested, saying, “But on earth I lived in a palace!”

The angel Gabriel replied, “I’m sorry. This is the best we could do with the material you sent up.”

What does heaven look like? And do our actions and desires here on earth make any difference when it comes to heaven?

Whatever heaven is really like, it’s clear that we can only know it through metaphor, by comparing it to things here on earth. And even in our greatest comparisons, we can’t know what heaven is truly like.

Yet, if we dig a little deeper and look behind our metaphors and comparisons to what they say – not about the substance of heaven but about its spiritual qualities – we can begin to get a sense of what heaven is like, and more importantly, what difference it makes to us here on earth.

The description of heaven we heard from Revelation this morning points to six qualities that we can focus on when thinking about heaven: access, guidance, adoration, abundance, healing, and, lastly, relationship.

The first three qualities of heaven – access, guidance, and adoration – have to do with our approach toward heaven. The last three qualities – abundance, healing and relationship – have to do with our experience of heaven, what we get or take away: abundance, healing, and relationship. But first, given a vision of heaven, let’s look at access, the author of Revelation says, “I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.” Throughout history, the temple has been what gave humankind access to God.

And even this was something only the Hebrew high priest could attain on behalf of the people; only he was permitted to enter the inner sanctum of the temple, and thus encounter God.

But in the New Testament, Revelation is saying that in heaven, there is no special place one has to be in order to access God and no high priest intermediary who one has to go through.

We all have access to God, anywhere we are; which if you think about, that's not just in heaven; that's something Christians also believe in regarding our earthly existence: direct access to God.

Maybe heaven and earth aren't as far apart as we suspect – in both places, when it comes to God, we have direct access.

Revelation goes on to say that heaven “has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb.” In heaven, God is the only light needed to show the way, and Christ, or the Lamb of God, is the lamp that shines divine light for all to see.

Well, this also sounds a lot like heaven and earth are pretty similar, at least when it comes to their basic spiritual qualities. In both places, we turn to Christ for divine guidance. “The nations will walk by its light,” says Revelation.

So we have direct access to divine guidance, but clearly, given the state of world affairs, we don't always tap into it, whether as nations or individuals or families or societies as a whole.

Maybe our access to heaven and our experience of it is related to our actions on earth.

Maybe theologian and writer C.S. Lewis had it right when he said, “If you read history you will find that the Christians who did the most for the present world were (precisely the ones) who thought most of the next. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world,” says Lewis, “that they have become so ineffective in this one.”¹

Christians have become ineffective in this world because of a lack of focus on God in heaven. In other words, says Lewis, “Aim at heaven and you will get earth ‘thrown in.’ Aim at earth and you will get neither.”²

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*.

² C.S. Lewis, *The Joyful Christian*.

So, how do we aim at heaven with the hope of getting what we need here on earth thrown into the deal? Revelation says of heaven, quote, "People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations."

Well if we are to bring glory and honor into heaven, shouldn't we align ourselves with glory and honor here on earth – the glory and honor of the Lord God Almighty?

What we worship and serve here on earth is what we will have with us to take into heaven. If we worship only money or status, that won't leave us much to take into heaven; because money and status are meaningless in heaven.

Same with our society's fixation on drugs and alcohol and sexuality, guns and violence and war – if those are the things we pour our energy into, then those become the things we worship.

If we want to have anything of value with us in heaven, then we need to keep focused on what is of true value here on earth – what it is that's truly worthy of adoration.

Revelation tells us, quote, "Nothing accursed will be found (in heaven) ..., but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him...." This is how we approach heaven – we approach heaven with direct access to God, through the divine guidance of Christ, while maintaining our adoration and worship of that which is worthy of God. Direct access, divine guidance, worthy adoration.

Next, we turn to the three things we experience in heaven: abundance, healing, and relationship.

The author of Revelation says, "The angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its 12 kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations."

From heaven, we receive the "water of life" and the "tree of life" and its 12 kinds of fruit, fruit so abundant that never a month goes by that we cannot be fed from it. From heaven, we receive life-sustaining abundance.

And healing – the leaves of the tree are for healing the nations, healing the people of the earth, healing you and me; body and soul – physical and spiritual healing.

And at the core of the healing available to us in heaven is the healing of relationships, our relationship with ourselves, and with others and with God.

This is the sixth and final quality of heaven we're looking at today. In heaven, there is no warring between nations, no fights among loved ones, no outbursts between parents and their children. In heaven, our relationships are, well, heavenly.

And in fact, children seem to know this better than adults. Across the country, children were asked what they thought happened when someone died.

Here's what Steve age 8 had to say:

"When you die, God takes care of you like your mother did when you were alive – only God doesn't yell at you all the time."

Or Kevin, age 10, who said:

"I'm not afraid to die because I'm a Boy Scout."

And then there's this one, for all those snowbirds planning their get away this summer, from nine-year-old July (JHuw-LAY):

"Only the good people go to heaven. The other people go where it's hot all the time, like in Florida."³ Only good people go to heaven.

Even 9-year-old July seems to know that what we experience in heaven is tied to how we act here on earth. And while there are no words to accurately describe the physicality of heaven – what it looks like and where it is – we can, through divine Revelation, describe heaven's spiritual qualities, its qualities of life-sustaining abundance, physical and spiritual healing, and relationships that are truly heavenly.

And the good news of Jesus Christ is that to have all this we don't have to wait till we die and go to heaven. God is reaching out to us this very moment with abundance and healing and peace. All we need to do is to stay focused on that, to know that we do have direct access to God through the divine guidance of our Lord Jesus Christ so that all we say and do might be worthy of true adoration.

As we move into the week ahead, let's carry with us this sense of divine access, guidance and adoration. And let's also seek after that which God would give us: life-sustaining abundance, physical and spiritual healing, and relationships that reflect for us a sense of heaven on earth.

To conclude our sermon time, and to help us hang onto our vision of what heaven is really like, I've got a song for us to listen to.

³ <http://www.homileticsonline.com>

It's from last year's American Idol winner, Phillip Phillips. His song is simply titled "Home."⁴ As you listen to the song, imagine how much God desires to make our world a heaven on earth for us, just as it is in heaven.

*Hold on, to me as we go
As we roll down this unfamiliar road
And although this wave is stringing us along
Just know you're not alone
Cause I'm going to make this place your home*

*Settle down, it'll all be clear
Don't pay no mind to the demons
They fill you with fear
The trouble it might drag you down
If you get lost, you can always be found*

*Just know you're not alone
Cause I'm going to make this place your home.*

PASTORAL PRAYER

O God, what joy that we can live as people of hope. What peace that we can know beyond a shadow of a doubt that this earth is not our final home.

We long for your beauty, your redemption of this life, for eternity with you. Help us to live with eternity always in our hearts – believing that the world to come far exceeds the world here on Earth.

And even so, we thank you for the tastes of heaven that we have here. They are gifts beyond measure stirring a longing for you in our souls. Come quickly, Lord Jesus, come.

And until that day when you do return in glory, help us to live out the prayer that you taught us to pray, and which we raise in song now, singing:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;

and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

⁴ Music video available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HoRkntoHkIE>.