Introduction *Heaven is like what?! Amen!*

Check-in & Introductions

Sermon Reflection Notes

Our own Missouri author, Mark Twain, wrote a pretty great book titled *Letters from the Earth* which satirizes humanity's understanding of religion. In this short little text, an angel sends letters back to heaven sharing what life is really like on Earth. The angel also shares that the human-invented version of heaven is a monotonous, absurd, and deeply ironic place that humans would actually loathe if they had to experience it. He writes that humans can't stand church for more than an hour and a quarter once a week, but they expect heaven will be like 'church' that lasts forever. He goes on to say how few people enjoy playing instruments on Earth, and nations war with other nations, and yet, people think that in heaven, everybody will be thrown together in brotherhood with people they don't like, playing harps. It's ridiculous, which was Twain's point.

The apocalyptic book of Revelation, written by a Christian named John who was exiled to an island for following Christ, is a complicated one to read. People had mostly stopped using the apocalyptic genre within 200 years of Jesus' death, and so they, like us, weren't really sure how to read it. But these writers were doing something beautiful. Their writing was a way to say "While we feel powerless under the tyranny of empires, we know God is still working behind the curtain. And when it's all unveiled, we know that God's story of love will win the day."

The scripture passage we heard this week is John's vision of what heaven is like. But what's notable is what this vision of heaven is NOT like. Instead of a 24/7 round of golf, endless shopping, or a continuous party with all our closest friends and family, Revelation provides a different picture. Heaven is not merely some place people go when they die. Rather, it's a reality that exists here and now. The world may plod along with war and despair, but right alongside such horror is the realm of God filled with peace, hope, and love.

The church, and all of us, struggle with talking about heaven in robust, orthodox ways, partly because we spend a lot of time focusing on comforting the bereaved. We offer well-meaning platitudes: *"I'm sure Betty is pruning her roses right now, just as she did every day on earth."* or *"Gary is looking down on us through the floors of heaven."* Chapter 7 of Revelation offers us some robust insights on how we might talk about heaven, and they are worth thinking about.

First, according to this scripture, heaven is ***not*** a very exclusive club. The reading begins with 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. There's every reason to think we are all invited. And that's pretty big news. It turns out there isn't a most-favored nation, nor a special race—or gender. There's no one who can't come to the party. Secondly, this multitude are the ones who "came out of the great ordeal." They are those who have known suffering, who have known what it meant to be denied mercy, to be given grief, to know cruelty, suffering, and pain. And, these are the ones whose robes have been washed in the blood of the Lamb, whose sin has been taken away by Jesus.

When we offer notions of heaven that include talk about pruning roses or looking down on us, we miss the most fundamental hope heaven offers---a gift given to us by the cross and resurrection---that sin and suffering are taken away so that we might know abundant life. The measure of heaven is not that your experiences didn't happen. It's that God redeems them. God knows your tears and doesn't ignore them. He knows your hunger and doesn't pretend it never existed. Rather, God sees the tears from oppression, the tears from severed relationships, or the tears from chemo treatments and Parkinson's disease, and offers compassion and newness.

Ultimately, heaven is about the goodness of God. In this vision found in Revelation, the multitude from every nation, the angels, and the elders are all positioning themselves toward the central location, where our God is seated on the throne. Heaven is, at its heart, about angels, saints, and multitudes uniting with the God who is making all things new by the power of Jesus, who is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Heaven is to be fully alive. And life is being in the presence of God, being sheltered by God, letting the Lamb be our shepherd. It means never being hungry or thirsty again. Sin and suffering are gone, and God gives eternal life. Heaven is about friends eating together at a banquet that celebrates the joining together of heaven and earth. And we are all invited to join that union, singing with those who have gone before us: *"Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen!"*

Scripture

Revelation 7:9-17

9 After 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. 10 They cried out in a loud voice,
saying,
"Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb!"
11 And 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, 12 singing,
"Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honor
and power and might
be to our God forever and ever! Amen."
13 Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where
have they come from?" 14 I said to him, "Sir, you are the one who 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."

Discussion Questions

1. Over years, what messages have been given by the church (of any denomination) about heaven?
2. Pastor Ron said: the church hasn't been very robust about what heaven is and what it isn't. What do we think he means? What is surprising about this?
3. Revelation 7 is clear that heaven isn't an exclusive party. Look at the lines. Where do we get the idea that it's a selective process with some kind of limit on who makes it?
4. We offer platitudes to ourselves and others to comfort the grieving, and that often ignores an important teaching about heaven. What is this important thing we tend to skip past? Why don't we offer that to those who are grieving?
5. Pastor Ron used the word 'redeemed' specifically. He said, "The message of heaven is not that your experiences didn't happen. It's that God redeems them." What does that word mean? Why is it so powerful?
6. Heaven is all about the goodness of God. How do we let go of the notion that heaven is a big party just for us? How do we begin to speak comfort differently to those grieving without coming across as sanctimonious?

Closing Prayer

Creator God, you break open our well-worn platitudes, self-righteous assumptions, and fear about what happens when we die. We struggle with the mystery of death, knowing that ultimately and finally we will not ever figure out or control they mystery of death. But what we do have are the words of the text, the experience of life, the tradition of the church, and the reasoning of our minds that you are there, beyond us, and yet within us. Our faith gives us the knowing the "bidden or unbidden, you are present" with us.

And so, give us the courage and the hope to hold onto your promise that in life and in death, you are with us and we are with you. Help us to trust both our own future and the future of those we love into your care. We pray together that your kingdom will come on earth, even as it is in heaven. We pray for joy and peace in the promise that you gather ***all*** of us into your family and your gather ***all*** of us around your table. We pray in the name of Jesus, who showed us the way. Amen.

"Heaven is to be fully alive with God."