



April 3, 2005
Communion of Saints

Revelation 21:1-4, 22:1-5

Living Under Heaven

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When it comes to the book of Revelation, there are two types of Christians - those who really like it and those who are scared of those who really like it. Actually, everything the Bible says about the future is meant to help us live more faithfully in the present.

Christ's revelation to the Apostle John takes us through a series of horrific images, all depicting the hardest of times with great persecution, tribulation, bloody battles and unimaginable suffering. It is very important to know that these were already the conditions of life being experienced by the first century church when John wrote down his vision. Jerusalem had been ravaged and devastated by Rome, which had also begun to persecute the church. The early Christians were experiencing great tribulation and martyrdom. The emperors Nero, Vespasian, and Domitian could all compete for the title Antichrist

All of the heartache that John and his church witnessed flew in the face of their great hope that soon Jesus would return and establish his new kingdom on earth. Oh, that wonderful kingdom of heaven, come to earth. Jesus had nurtured a passion for it in the hearts of his disciples. He heaped parable after parable on them, trying to describe it. He said the kingdom is like a treasure found, a lost son who returns home, or a great feast where only the unworthy attend. The kingdom is like falling in love, but with your enemy.

It had been over a generation since Christ planted those dreams and then left, promising to come back and make the dreams come true. Where was he? Where was his kingdom of heaven? With their world crumbling to an end, the first readers of John's apocalypse were certain Christ and his kingdom would come soon.

For the last 2,000 years, scarcely has a generation passed in history that someone hasn't noticed how harsh the world has become and said, "This is it. This is the end of the line for history. Surely Jesus is returning very soon." Some said it when the 20th century genocides gave us modern examples of evil Antichrists. Others said it when we invented nuclear weapons capable of creating a literal fiery Armageddon. Still others said it when we sunk into the cold war and learned the rhetoric of evil empires. Five years ago, when the calendar flipped over into year 2,000 those who believe Jesus can only work in round numbers were sure that was when the kingdom heaven would come down to earth.

In the words of the church historian Martin Marty, the world is always coming to an end. He said that not just to critique the end times enthusiasts, but to say, of course, the world is always

coming to an end. Just as the world of the first century had come to an end, just as the world of the 20th century had come to an end and died, so does your world comes to an end when someone you cherish dies.

When that happens, when you bury a loved one, what you most want to believe is that the end is not the end. You want to believe that there is something else beyond the life we know. You want to believe that Christ has gone to prepare a place for us. In other words, you want to believe in the kingdom of heaven. Often when I am consoling someone in grief over a life that has come to an end, I will be asked what heaven is like. Not having been there, you realize that I am a bit handicapped in responding. But the Bible does tell us some things about heaven. And the most important thing it claims is that heaven exists.

A recent *Time Magazine* poll stated that 81% of Americans believe in heaven. It also claimed that only 63% of us believe in hell, which is rather convenient. Some are puzzled that so many would believe in heaven in a scientific era. Others, however, are claiming that it is the scientists who have the greatest doubts about the notion of a self contained universe, and are now are making intellectual room for heaven. The new discoveries of supernovas, black holes, quarks, and theories of a big bang lead some scientists to wonder if there is not a grand designer of the universe. Speculation about parallel universes, new dimensions, and anomalies in the space-time continuum have even provided a conceptual framework for some to discuss a wholly different realm of existence beyond the end of what we know on earth.

This is all quite interesting, but you are not going to find a lot of support for these speculations in the Bible. No, the basis of the biblical doctrine of the kingdom of heaven is found in Jesus Christ. "I am the Alpha and Omega," says the Lord, "the first and the last, the beginning and the end." As we declared last week on Easter, when you get to the end, you are not at the end because Jesus Christ is waiting on the other side of death with the gift of eternal life.

This is John's claim as well. He did not write the Book of Revelation to speculate about actual events at the end of time but to provide a metaphorical vision that would encourage the believers who faced tribulation and death as they approached what seemed like the end of their time. At the conclusion of his vision he makes it clear that the home of God will be among mortals. "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more. Mourning and crying and pain will be no more.... Nothing accursed will be found there any more. And there will be no more night...." That sure sounds like heaven. That is how the story ends, and it is also how your story can end. If you know that is how the story ends, it changes your perspective on the chapter of the story you living today.

Here is John's point: If you believe that heaven is waiting up ahead for you, then it is also always above you. Heaven exists not just as a future place to go after we die, but also as an inspiration for the life you have today. If you believe Jesus Christ is behind you and ahead of you, then you can certainly believe that he is also above you. This frees you to live under heaven every day of your life. That will make all of the difference in how you live your life. In fact, it can make a world of difference.

If you read church history, you will discover that those who did the most to reform the present world believed most strongly in the world to come. This is true of the apostles who sought the conversion of the Roman Empire, the architects of the City of God that inspired society for a thousand years, the English pietists who abolished their slave trade, the African American pastor who gave the 20th century a dream of a color blind society, the nun in Calcutta who taught us to treat the dying with dignity, and the pope who died yesterday after years of engaging his church in a vision for world peace. Where did they all find their vision for life in this world? From everything Jesus taught us about the kingdom of heaven. These who made a difference in the world organized their lives vertically, under heaven, and taught us to do the same.

When Protestants speak of saints, we do not stress only these who were role models of piety and mission. Rather we maintain an affinity for the ordinary variety of saints who died believing in the grace of God, in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for the sins that separate them from heaven, and in the love of God that raises us to a new eternal life.

Today we are remembering our saints who died since last Easter. Some of these names you may know. Others you do not know, but you may have shared a pew with them this last year. To our list, you will have to add the other saints whose names you alone know because you still carry them in your heart. And now they are all in heaven, risen from the dead.

Down here, the people who really believe that, live differently than others. They make choices more easily because they believe their choices are seldom ultimate. They are much less cautious with life, much more likely to laugh at themselves because they do not believe they are the Alpha and Omega. They are much more likely to care about others because they do not waste time trying to save themselves, and they are much more likely to enjoy life because they know it is a gift from heaven to be savored.

There is not a saint in heaven who is there because of being good enough. They are there because the grace of God raised them from the dead before they died. Even while they lived among us, they lived to participate in Christ's work of bringing heaven into earth.

That can be the legacy of your life as well. All the saints who have gone before you are reaching down over the balcony of heaven and they are encouraging you to lift up your heart. Lift it above your fear of death and loss and tribulation. Lift it up to the risen Savior that you too may find a sacred vision for making a world of difference in your corner of the earth beneath heaven. Amen.