

Title: “Heaven, Watered Down.”

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Revelation 7:11-12

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Service Readings: Rev. 7:9-17; 1 John 3:1-3; Matt 5:1-12

It is a question that is so often asked to people of all ages: What, exactly, is heaven. We read today that heaven is not just a “what” but also a “who.”

Message:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Over the summer I had the opportunity to spend a week with some 30 young children in Vacation Bible School. In one of our conversations, I asked each grade to describe heaven for me. You can imagine their responses. Food was at the top of their list, as was independence. No longer restrained by the rules of their parents or other loved ones they were free make their own decisions – and none of them involved bedtimes, broccoli, or school. There were pets, there were sweets, and there were toys – lots of toys. You see, heaven for them was just a better version of what they were already familiar with.

Now for us, our answer may be different. It may not include candy or bedtimes, but what does it include? To some, it is a place where there is no longer pain, or a place where all our loved ones are waiting for us. And this is all true, but at the very core of that answer, doesn't it sound like heaven is just the “next thing” to experience? Doesn't that answer make it sound like we are placed on a roller coaster at birth and, at our death, exit that one and make our way to the next? A ride that is much longer but causes us no fear, anxiety, or pain? A ride where all our friends experience it with us? There is little wonder that we think of it this way because we've never experienced anything like it. We really can't describe it because it *truly is* unimaginable. So, because we can't simply accept that reality, we do what is normal and apply what we *do know* to what we *do not*. But when we do this, we are left filling in the spaces of the unknown with our own limited imagination and that affects our anticipation. Because we don't know what we don't know, any message about yearning for heaven rings hollow, the anticipation is subdued, and the appreciation is taken for granted. All this because what we are doing is viewing heaven by only looking up. What I mean is that when we view heaven like another *place*, when all we see are the pearly gates as just an entrance into the new world, it is natural to compare that to our current lives, our current Earth, and wonder. Is the grass *really* that much greener? Is it *really* going to be unimaginably great? Or will it be simply.... Imaginable?

<pause>

If you were anything like me as a child, when I read the first verses of this passage I wondered if heaven was *really* where I wanted to end up. Listen to this from a child's perspective, starting in verse 11:

¹¹ And all the angels were standing 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 saying, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

Praising God 24/7 sure didn't sound like the heaven I wanted to spend my eternity in. Where were the toys, the food, and the parties? Where were the gifts that kept on giving? *My heaven* would be eternal life spent exploring the far reaches of God's universe – the galaxies, the stars, the planets. I could never imagine heaven being like an endless worship service – especially one that I would enjoy! That is not a version of heaven that I would have been interested in.

What about you? You may not consider heaven as a base camp for exploration but maybe you consider it as the meeting place for reunion? Today, we celebrate all of those who have gone before us but with an incomplete understanding of *where* they have gone, and *why* they have gone even our celebration rings hollow. We can comfort ourselves with reminders of heavenly reunions but is that really where Jesus wants us to locate our joy? Just in the reunions of others. I long to see those who have gone before me; I long to feel their embrace and to hear their voices once again. But I also know that as amazing as that will be, there is something even more wonderful that awaits me. And if I focus only on my loved ones I miss out on what heaven really is.

You see, in our humanity so often we look up to heaven with an incomplete view. We anticipate these reunions with our precious family and friends but that provides a thin sliver of what waits for us, like a single brush stroke of a painting. But this morning I'd like to try and paint a different picture – one that is more complete. But to see it we must not only *look up* we also have to *look down*. We must view heaven by viewing it through the lens of hell, for hell is the antithesis of heaven; they are in direct opposition to each other. Hell is not just a place – it is *an existence* where the condemned live in eternal separation with God and all that is good. I can't even begin to imagine what it would be like to not experience God's presence in my life. But I *can* imagine that lacking this relationship with God would trump any physical feature of that place. It wouldn't matter how hot the fire; that would be a minor inconvenience compared to separation from God!

But this is where we were headed, and we were fine with it because we believed that hell was *just* a destination, and probably one where we could learn to adapt. Even today, ask others to describe hell and they'll talk in terms of fire and suffering but rarely in terms of relationships with God. We tend to not understand or appreciate how horrible eternal existence is apart from him because we have no experience with anything like it and so we think of it in terms of a physical location.

And because we couldn't comprehend existence without the creator, and because we really didn't even care, he took the solution upon himself and sent his son to take on our sin, to become sin and to experience that separation – so that we never would. But here's the thing that is so amazing. The victory that Jesus achieved and freely handed to us is not just salvation from hell. He didn't simply save us from eternity without God. Nor did he simply just give us access to God's presence. Jesus didn't defeat death just so that we could enter a doorway into another world. His victory did far more than anything that can be described in spatial terms. You see, heaven is not just about the place; it is not just about the people. Sure, those things are awesome, but they are like perks to

what heaven really is. Just like hell is a complete separation from God, heaven is a complete union with him.

Paul writes in Galatians:

“I am crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me...”

In baptism we were joined with Christ, not only in his death but also in his resurrection. We are in Christ and Christ is in us. This union doesn't disintegrate when we die. Quite the opposite! We experience the fullness of that relationship. We will experience God in ways that we could never have imagined.

In our passage this morning we read about some of those that have gone before us. Starting in verse 9:

⁹ After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, ¹⁰ and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

That multitude was not worshiping because they had to, but because they couldn't contain themselves. They stood before the throne because there was no other place they would rather be! There may be candy forests and there will surely be our loved ones, but if you are to ask any of these, they'll tell you that at the moment, and for all of eternity, they are preoccupied with who is on the throne. That right now, all they are able to do is worship because everything else simply seems secondary. Heaven to them is not about the what, or the where but all about the who. And the “who” is on the throne and it is just possible that eternity is not going to be long enough for them to worship and praise Him. I may not have the ability to imagine it, but I trust God when he tells me that it will be better than I can imagine. This is what I'm looking forward to. What about you?

Please pray with me.

¹⁵ “Therefore they are before the throne of God,
and serve him day and night in his temple;
and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.

¹⁶ They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore;
the sun shall not strike them,
nor any scorching heat.

¹⁷ For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of living water,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Amen