

Matthew 17:1-3; 22:28-32
Mark 12:25
Luke 9:22; 18:29-30; 23:39-43
John 3:16; 5:24
Romans 6:22-23
II Corinthians 4:17-5:1

THE LAST TIME I SAW HEAVEN

I would like to commend Jean on her choice of sermon topics. If you are a visitor, the choice for today's sermon topic was auctioned off a few weeks ago, and it brought such a high price that we were able to re-roof the church. Well, that doesn't really tell the whole story, and neither will this sermon. "My call is for a sermon on eternal life," Jean said. We raised the roof, and Jean wants it to go clear to Heaven! The *topic* of this sermon (not the sermon itself) is truly beyond price, and the pearl for which any awakened human would sell all that they have. (Does that remind you of one of Jesus' parables?) One of the first things I always want to know about a preacher is: Do they really believe in the hope and promise of eternal life, or have they got it so symbolized, rationalized, diluted, and convoluted that it no longer has any impact on how we live? Well, we shall see.

The Christian concept of eternal life is about you as an individual – your own particular and special identity in some recognizable form – continuing in a life which has no end ... a life which keeps expanding, growing, going from dimension to dimension or, as they used to say, "from glory unto glory." The topic itself is loaded with booby-traps. Every word we use about such a concept is an invitation to misunderstanding. The temptation to qualify every comment is overwhelming. If it sounded to you like I used any "funny" words in that statement, no trick was intended in them. I fully expect that you will be around ten thousand years from now, and way beyond that. When we meet, I will know your name (better than I sometimes do today), and it will remind me of your identity – though I imagine that your identity, while obvious, will nevertheless amaze me. That is, the true essence of who you are will be much clearer and more powerful and more beautiful. I even suspect that I will wonder why I did not recognize it more clearly way back when we were in this together. On the other hand, I already recognize some of your high identity more clearly than you realize. And that increases every week. But I am way ahead of my sermon.

It is not by way of deprecation, but only to be clear: New-Agers picture sort of a cross between Christianity and Eastern religions – a mixture of reincarnation and Heaven – where the soul goes from experience to experience, both on earth and elsewhere, as it grows toward enlightenment and its innate Christness or Godness. But the personality is sloughed off at each new round, and only the soul essence survives and moves on. Hinduism and Buddhism envision a nirvana where no trace of individuality remains to muck things up. There can be no bliss where any form of self-will, desire, attachment, or personal consciousness remains, they say.

Not to deprecate anyone else's tradition, but to claim our own: In Christendom, we believe that God loves us personally; loves each of us as a unique, special child (as we often put it); loves us both as what we are (warts and problems and all) and what we are to become. We expect, then, a series of endless transformations that will destroy none of the essence of who and what we are, but will move us toward the full development and expression of what God created us to be. At our current level, of course, we get only the barest glimmer of any of our true capacities. Why do people love to learn? Why do so many love to teach, to mentor, to nurture others, to help others? Why is it such a joy to help people expand or discover that they have capabilities they did not know they had? Why do people love to watch the Olympics? It is a major theme in Creation. Getting into it on almost any level resonates with something deep inside. We are on a pilgrimage. Increasing our capacities, and helping others to increase theirs, is one of the highest joys in life. You think that's an accident? The Creator built that into the warp and woof of Creation.

By the way, growth is not automatic. I suppose that is one of the self-evident truths, but when it comes to religion, we keep forgetting it, or denying it. Transformation is always waiting for us, but we are not forced to claim it. Rip Van Winkle slept through the revolution – his own as well as the one going on around him. Jesus was ever complaining: “You have eyes but do not see, you have ears but do not hear – you are zombies – wake up! You are fixated on fear and guilt and earthly survival – on resentments, money, clothes, and your position in a pretend and passing society. The Kingdom is all around you – come alive, and learn, and love, and grow.” But Jesus' very appeal and approach and method reveal that it is never automatic. It is a choice, and it goes on being a choice, and I suspect that will remain true through all eternity. If God does not coerce here, why would we expect God to shift basic methodology

in the realms beyond? So the biggest threat to eternal life is not evil, but sleep – non-awakening – turning away from life.

Most of you have realized that the opposite of love is not hatred, but indifference. Hatred is passion. Hatred cares a lot. Hatred can shift into love very quickly, and vice versa. The true opposite of love is indifference: couldn't care less; no passion; nothing to work with; nothing. In the same way, evil is not the opposite of life. It is still in the game, however misguided and wrong. God keeps converting and forgiving those who fight him. Saul turns into Paul, the great apostle. But what can you do with the indifferent, the asleep? *"I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you [emeo, vomitar – you get the meaning] out of my mouth."* (Revelation 3:15-16) Who is saying this?

The enemy of eternal life is neutrality – indifference. Maintain it long enough, and we blink out. *Ex nihilo*. Not Hell; non-being. God only punishes to correct. The imagery of Hell has gotten way out of hand. First of all, it is only imagery. Physical flames do not burn souls. In the second place, the function of flames, symbolically, is to purify. They burn away the trash, the perishable, that which is holding us back. The symbol of Hell and the symbol of the Holy Spirit are the same: The flames of purification. *"I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."* (Matthew 3:11) Smelting – getting rid of the dross. All that junk (fear, pride, guilt) we carry weighs us down.

We are already living our eternal life. We are also already going through Hell. But if we are asleep spiritually, our eternal life is not yet activated. We are unconverted – just going through the motions. *"You must be born anew, born of the spirit,"* Jesus said. You enter the Kingdom when you awaken to it. Not when you die physically, but when you die to the old life with yourself in charge, and turn to the new LIFE of awareness and obedience to God. None of us know for sure how spiritually awake a person has to be to survive earthly death – how much we have to know and care about for there to be enough to work with in the realms beyond. But today, assuming we are awake to the Kingdom, we are talking about the LIFE that never ends.

If you do not realize it, I want you to know how thoroughly eternal life is the perspective of the New Testament, and of the Christian mindset.

It seems rather silly to most of you that I would even make such a point, since it is so obvious. The fact is, a lot of people in our time read the Bible, but their eyes pass over this theme until they are no longer even aware of it. I hope you felt it in the medley of Scripture readings this morning. Everywhere you go in the New Testament, eternal life is the backdrop or the subject. If the readings came through your filters, get a New Testament you don't mind marking up, take a highlighter, and read at least one Gospel (better the whole New Testament, but at least one Gospel) and highlight every phrase and passage that talks about eternal life or assumes the existence of eternal life. When you have finished, try to read what is left that is not highlighted.

What is left are some connector phrases, some events that make little sense, and a few ethical precepts. By the way, the ethical precepts of the New Testament will suddenly seem quite ludicrous and nonsensical if you have erased eternal life from the picture. (Turn the other cheek ... forgive seventy times seven ... take up your cross daily? What on earth for?!)

Even if you do not dispute the point in the least, I hope you will do this highlighter exercise anyway. The experience will protect and defend you from a whole lot of modern-day baloney. Jesus is talking about eternal life, promising eternal life, coming to invite and entice us to join a Kingdom not of this world – into a world which has no end. He Himself lives and dies for it. His death and resurrection are the culmination of the Message He brings and, for Christians, proof of the truth of it. If you have been limping along with a faith and a hope that leave most of this muted (turned down so low you can barely hear it), or set off in a corner as if it is not important, or mythologized or symbolized until it is merely an intellectual curiosity – then you are not hearing or dealing with the Christian Faith at all. God loves you personally, and loves you so much that he wants you in a love-bond with him and with all his other children, from now on. *That* is the Christian Gospel. *That* is the “news” of Jesus Christ. Some people call it Good News; some people today think it is horrible news. But that is the Message. If you have a different message, then call it by some other name. Christendom has believed in eternal life from its beginning. That does not mean we cannot question it, or wonder about it, or wonder how it works. But it does mean that if we change the Message, it is no longer Christianity, and we are no longer being fair or honest about what Christianity is and proclaims.

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It is important, with such a subject, to get personal. I know as well as you do that I cannot be correct about the details. I know better than some of you seem to that if I do not keep picturing the hope to the best of my ability, it will not move or draw me with any power. I trust God to have it worked out far better than I do. But every choice I make, and much of the energy I draw on to make it through my days, comes from what I am moving toward. We live by hope and we live for the hope we have – unless we are only mouthing words. So you are not stuck with any of this. But I am, and I love it. And it keeps improving as my understanding grows.

Okay, here we go: This world is boot camp. Some of you would prefer “classroom,” but my life does not seem to come in pastel shades. This world is boot camp – training ground for realms to come. Everything here is designed for this purpose. If money is important here, I trust the Designer, who must be trying to teach me things essential to know in the coming realms. If sex is important here, there must be essential principles connected with it (for example, selfishness does not work; without commitment, it is soon ruined; and much, much more). All things here have meaning, if we can find it. TRUST THE DESIGNER. And very important to me is that boot camp will remain boot camp: This realm is not designed for full potential. This is not Heaven. This is not as good as it gets – thank God! (Where do you think you are?)

By the way, it has started again. Some of you are telling me that you find God a lot better out in nature. Watching everything eat each other does not give me the warm fuzzies it apparently gives some of you. I could watch nature for a billion years and never deduce from it that God cared a flying flip for me or any other creature. That Cross is our only hope. But the point is, we will never make this a perfect world. God has not built this boot camp for perfection – it is built for a training ground. So it will stay boot camp. Within a fairly small spectrum, the world will get better and worse, but it always returns to balance as a boot camp. *“For the poor you have with you always; but you do not always have me.”* Or so said Jesus. (Matthew 26:11) *Of course* it matters how we react to it all, but the only thing that really matters is the impact on the people. They are going to go on. The rest of it is not.

When we get to the next realm, we take up there essentially where we left off here – at least in terms of spiritual stature and understanding. Our identity will be the same, but our capacities will have increased. Yet no matter how much our capacities increase, it will not make any difference if we are still asleep. And no matter how many times we have been

converted (awakened), we know that there are still many ways and many areas in which we are still asleep. Nevertheless, in the next realm, we will not have as many limitations. We will have what Paul calls “spiritual bodies.” That is a contradiction in terms, in this realm, but I mention it because some of you have a Casper complex – the friendly ghost with no substance. If your hope of Heaven is ethereal, so will be the choices you make here.

No matter what they do to your body here, you will get a new “spiritual body,” which will be an idealized version of what you wore here. Only, it will have a few new features: It will not get sick, or old. It will not starve, and cannot be killed. Its mind will have more memory banks, and new powers of concentration and projection. Wrong choices will be far more dangerous and harder to correct, which is why you had to go through boot camp here in the first place. You think God likes having to put you through this? Free will is no joke. Without it, there is no meaning. So you will still have free choice in the next realm – you will still be able to make wrong choices and suffer the consequences. But because you were here, you will have some pretty clear notions of where that leads and what comes of it.

If you think of yourself as a three-dimensional creature here, expect yourself to have about ten dimensions in the first realm beyond. That is, a ten-dimensional person can do everything a three-dimensional person can do, only a great deal more besides. Of course, we do not have the details with any accuracy. The point is, eternal life is not a reduction. You can throw a baseball and hug a child here, but in the next realm you will just be some vague, oblong blur that drifts like smoke? I thought you believed God was good – and intelligent! Then why do so many people picture a Heaven that would be insanely insipid and boring? Or, in disgust or afraid of the disappointment, they decide there is no Heaven at all, except maybe in some symbolic way. God is a gaseous vapor, and we are made in God’s image? No wonder you don’t want to tithe.

Expect challenge and adventure and risk to match the new capacities. Why would God put such emphasis on courage, patience, trust, and humility here if you are not going to need them there? Expect an evaluation shortly after you die here. Look forward to it. You will get a chance to know the truth about many puzzles and contradictions and sorrows. I am sure some of it will bring remorse – awareness of missed chances, sadness at pain we have caused, ways we could have helped if we had only understood more clearly. And I expect we will have many relationships to heal and many amends left to make when it all starts to come clear. But I

believe you will be amazed at God's true opinion of you – shocked and surprised at God's understanding and appreciation for your courage and endurance, how hard you tried, and how well you did with what you were handed. After all, God knows it is boot camp, even if you do not. And God will remember every good effort and every kind thought, not just the mistakes and wrong moments, which are what we tend to remember most. After all, what matters most is what we have learned. And there is no mistake you can make that God cannot fix. That is why God put you in this temporal realm, so you could knock off the edges without doing any eternal damage. And no matter how much you think you believe in God's love, you will be overwhelmed by the true magnitude of it.

Well, I am out of time, and hardly begun. It is appropriate that anything we ever say about eternal life must be partial, incomplete, inadequate, and hopelessly mundane. Otherwise it would not *be* eternal life. But Jean, thank you for choosing this topic. Whatever you may think of this sermon, I am looking forward to seeing Dan again. I expect to go on knowing you, and doing things with you, for several trillion years. I like being a minister here, but I have always had the eerie and wonderful awareness that what we see happening here is only the tiniest tip of the iceberg. I expect to be “stuck” with the relationships I am building here for a lot longer than this solar system will last. For better or for worse, Jesus cancels out the concept of goodbye.

So let us go to His words:

“In that day you will ask in my name; and I do not say to you that I shall pray to the Father for you; for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from the Father. I came from the Father and have come into the world; again, I am leaving the world and going to the Father.” (John 16:26-28)

“Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am, there you may be also.” (John 14:1-3)

I cannot prove to any of you that this is true. But I can tell you that with all my heart and mind and soul, I believe it. I do not need any of you to believe it to make it true. But in some lovely way, I hope you believe it too, or will soon.