

“What of Heaven”
Text - Wisdom of Solomon 3: 1-9
Preached, October 29, 2006
Reverend Benjamin Broadbent

Morning Scripture:

I would ask you to read along on this scripture, but it's not in the Bible in front of you. This reading from the Wisdom of Solomon is what is considered an apocrypha or deuteron [sp?] canonical book. So you have to find a special Bible, like the ones we just gave to our confirmation class, which includes the apocrypha works. You would find this book in Catholic Bibles and in Orthodox Bibles, but not in our own. I don't understand the exact debate, but the Protestant Bible has a smaller canon, a smaller collection of readings than other branches of the faith. So this is from the third chapter of the Wisdom of Solomon, versus 1 through 9.

“The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them. In the eyes of the foolish, they seemed to have died, and their departure was thought to be a disaster, and their going from us to be their destruction; but they are at peace.

“For though in the sight of others they were punished, their hope is full of immortality. Having been disciplined a little, they will receive great good, because God tested them and found them worthy of himself; like gold in the furnace, He tried them, and like a sacrificial burnt offering, He accepted them.

“In the time of their visitation, they will shine forth, and will run like sparks through the stubble. They will govern nations and rule over peoples, and the Lord will reign over them forever.

“Those who trust in Him will understand truth, and the faithful will abide with Him in love, because grace and mercy are upon His holy ones, and He watches over His elect.”

Rev. Broadbent:

Here ends the reading. This reading is the lectionary reading for All Saints Day, November 1st, and there are a lot of wonderful ideas in here. It would serve us well to consider the context in which they were written. They were written by a Jewish community in Alexandria, which was Egypt, still is Egypt, in the century before Christ lived. It was part of the Jewish Diaspora, the Jewish community living outside of Israel. And they were pressed on from all sides by the dominant culture, which was the Hellenic culture, the Greek culture that surrounded the Mediterranean.

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The power was in the hands of the Romans, but the ideas were Hellenic, or Greek. And so this Jewish community, perhaps at the brink of disappearing and overwhelmed with sorrow at having lost the best and the brightest of their generation, wondered, "Well, if they didn't see the restoration of the world, then what hope have we?" And so they used these wonderful juxtapositions.

The broader culture thinks that these folks died, and all of their work was to nothing. But we know better. We know that their souls are in the hand of God. It may have seemed like they suffered, even greatly, but their great suffering was so little compared to the great promise and the gift that God has promised them.

Jesus, in his own time, which was, like I mentioned, a century after this, was pressed upon by various ideas of the afterlife. The afterlife, and I say that not just heaven, because heaven is just one idea having to do with the afterlife, it's so big. In fact, I feel like deciding to preach on that I've stumbled into something that is really too big for me to even articulate. I wonder if it would be better for me to just say, "Let's spend the next ten, fifteen minutes and look at all these beloved faces here on our altar."

I have to let you know that just looking out at you, you're preaching a sermon to me, because I not only see your faces, vibrant in the glow of the sun coming through the windows, looking forward to the service and the day ahead of you, I also see loss. I was just realizing that, how many of you when I look at your face I not only think of your life and your personality and your family and all that you live for, but I see the ones that you have lost. And that's a part of who you are and a part of who we are.

And so our ideas about the afterlife and about heaven sometimes consume us. And it often has to do with how we view this world. How should we go on living when the one that we love so dearly, who was our hope, our life, is now gone? Where are they? What are they doing? Can I still talk with them? If I sense their presence at some time, is that really them? Or is it me fooling myself?

What do we have to look forward to? Not just we who are among the living who too will die some day, but who do we as collective humanity, living out our lives on this earth together, have to look forward to if even our best and brightest and our most beloved are now gone, have themselves not seen the renewal of the world?

In Jesus' time, they too were surrounded by ideas of the afterlife, all of which I think will ring somewhat true with us. There were the Sadducees who were aligned with the political and religious elite. They tended to not put much, if any, stock in the afterlife. It's God's world. It's God's will. The way things are right now are the way they are always going to be. So if you're on top, stay

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there. If you're on the bottom, well, too bad for you, unless you can figure out a way to get to the top. We live out our lives in this exact situation, and then that's it. So make the most of it.

The Hellenists, some of whose ideas are reflected in the Wisdom of Solomon, and I think is probably the dominant notion for us as a culture. You can disagree, but let me describe it. The Hellenists believe in an immortal soul that upon the death of the body, goes on living in a disembodied way in heaven, in another dimension or some place.

And there were different views of that. One view is that there is a place that you don't want to go. It's called Hell or Gehenna. And there are certain things that you can either do or believe, or maybe it's all up to fate that you end up in another place, the place we want to be, which is heaven.

The Zealots, at the time of Jesus, were those who felt that the ones who were willing to make the ultimate sacrifice were the ones who would receive paradise. You could compare this to modern day extremists who believe that actions, usually violent actions, will somehow earn them a place at God's right hand.

And then there were the Pharisees. And I've said it before; Jesus was more closely aligned with the Pharisees than any other group. And the Pharisees believed in resurrection. That was their idea of the afterlife. It goes back to the ancient Israelite understanding that when we die we go down into the earth, quite literally, but also spiritually, to a place called Sheol. [?] And the most ancient version of Sheol, it was neither good nor bad to go there. It was a matter of fact. Just like when we die, our bodies or our ashes return to the earth as a matter of fact. And then the [inaudible] sayeth "Hope was that God would restore all of the faithful to the earth in their bodies again." In this view, there is no going to heaven. You don't leave the earth. The earth is the place that God has created and that has loved and that God fills with God's own love. This is where we live out our days. In fact, our endless days. This is it.

Jesus drew ideas from all of these different schools of thought, most closely, as I said, with the Pharisees. The way he differed from the Zealots is that he felt that it is not a violent act that is going to get you into heaven. In fact, it is a leaving behind of violence and of entering that circle of violence that brings about God's kingdom now.

He disagreed with the Sadducees that there is no afterlife. He did not believe that death was the end but that in God we live on.

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And with the Hellenists, it seems that they had a belief in the immortality of the soul, but not ultimately in a disembodied way, but along with his Pharisee brothers and sisters, in an embodied way.

But where he differed with the Pharisees was that he did not believe that we needed to achieve some form of purity or legal purity in order to receive the kingdom of God. In fact, he turned that upside down, and he said, “Those who you think are the most filthy, the greatest outcasts, the ones you think are the furthest away from the kingdom of God, they will be the first to taste it.”

Boy these ideas are big. And all we have really is our imagination to get around them. Nobody, in the same way that you would have an experience in the physical life, could tell you exactly what the physical or spiritual or emotional experience of death would be like. Yes, there are near death experiences, and when I’ve heard people talk about that, and when somebody I know and love, I think, you know, I have no firsthand experience of this, but I absolutely trust you. But I still can’t get my mind around it.

So what do we do with these ideas? What do we do especially when the threats to our earth itself are so huge?

I was invited earlier in the week to go to the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs to watch “An Inconvenient Truth.” Now, it’s not the end all in movies, but it certainly gets across the point that we are in a world of hurt, that there are processes with our very atmosphere that a hundred years were not in place and now are accelerating at a massive rate, as we consume more and more and more, and the carbon dioxide increases in our atmosphere. The very earth itself is at threat. It’s all the more reason, frankly, to adopt an escapist idea. That is, well, this earth is going to hell in a hand basket. I’m going to put my hope in that which is not here. That which exists in some other plane, some other world, where everything is restored, while in the meantime, this place goes all to hell.

I don’t blame you if you’ve had that thought. I’ve had that thought. And our greatest hope is not that we would be able to escape this place. That is a hope, in some sense, that the one who we mourn now is with God, and that God is present with them. And that in some way, they are still present with us in spirit, if not so much in body. But our greatest hope is this. It almost seems audacious to even express it. But that this earth, this world, the entire universe, is not going to hell in a hand basket.

That does not ignore the problems, but it does mean that in and through us and in and through those who have gone on before, God is about the work of restoring, renewing, fulfilling life. Here. Nowhere else. Here.

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Paul calls Jesus' resurrection a sign of the first fruits of the new creation. So this is the amazing truth. You don't even have to wait for it. It's already happening in your life. The first fruits have already been gathered, and we now have been invited to bring in the harvest. Now. And those who have gone on before have done that important harvest work.

And I really do believe that there will be a time when we will see, not only God face-to-face, but our beloved again. Face-to-face. Having worked together in our own limited ways to bring about the harvest, which is the purpose and the end of all creation.

Amen.