

ABOUT HEAVEN

Ithaca, August 8, 2005

This sermon was given by the Reverend Robert L. Johnson – or Bob, as we called him – during his tenure at the Chapel from 2004-2006. He was very well read, although had never followed the Lectionary as he had come to us in retirement straight from Sage Chapel where he had never preached. Instead, he invited luminaries – such as *William Buckley* and *John Cleese* - to do it instead. Tim and I were there early to hear John Cleese who was so popular that he overfilled the 800 seats, tempting Bob to say “nice to see a full house, and BTW, WHERE have you all been?” A note from Bob’s eldest son, Luke, adds “*I am so pleased and moved to know that dad’s sermons are still living at Forest Home Chapel since he so admired & loved that congregation and church”!*

As a Chapel, we decided to save some of Bob’s sermons in a small book which I have been reading as I looked for a sermon that I could understand, and if I didn’t, I found words that would clear it up. Meaning, some of these words are mine! And another thing, Bob’s vision of heaven may not agree with yours, but then, who really knows? It is all a matter of faith.

Texts: Luke 17:20-21, "The kingdom of God is in the midst of you."

Revelation 21:1-5, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away... "

Bob started this sermon by admitting he had qualms about trespassing on popular religious views, yet he knew we were open-minded. And we knew Bob dealt daily with students who were exposed to teachers such as Carl Sagan, who relished exposing religious falsehood in the light of science. "The cosmos, " Sagan said, ‘was all there ever was and all there ever will be. No God, no heaven, no hell.’”

But Bob spoke about heaven anyway, starting out with....

“At my age of 80, I attend a lot of funerals and heaven always comes up. At least one member of this very congregation advised me, prior to doing a memorial service: "Go easy on the heaven bit."

For many, heaven is where we get compensation for surviving the tough times of being faithful. There will be no pain, no sorrow; just angelic music, riches and rest; gates of pearl and streets of gold. Billy Graham said he would have a yellow Cadillac. Jehovah's Witnesses say that only 144,000 (one hundred and forty-four thousand) will make it into heaven. And Muslim male Jihadists look forward to the attentions of 72 virgins. Paul says there will be no marriage in heaven, and the Book of Revelation says nor will there be any temples. Millions of the faithful look forward to a place where they will greet old friends, talk with historic figures, and be given ‘new life’ in case the old one was lacking in some small way.

Against that glorious vision, we should look to the ancient world, namely the great astronomer and mathematician Ptolemy who, building on Aristotle, said the earth was the center of the universe surrounded by successive spheres or heavens. It had three stories: earth, heavens above, and hell below. Paul later could write of being caught up into "the third heaven" to indicate an especially transcendent moment. Long after Ptolemy, came the Renaissance scholar and canon, Copernicus, who said that the sun, and not the earth, was the center of our universe. This then unleashed the theory that the heavens reached way beyond our known universe. Then the biblical heaven seemed even more incredible.

So what is an intelligent believer to think – or believe? For many, it could be a retreat from the biblical claims. However, what I'm going suggest is that we look again at the message and life of Jesus. It still strikes me as Good News, and I ask you to think about Jesus’ message. Look at the

earliest Gospel of Mark where Jesus first appears: *Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the good news of God and saying the time has come and the kingdom of God is here. Repent and believe the Good News* (Mark 1:14) The emphasis is on the reality of God's reign in the here and now. In the here and now. To support that, let's look at the three core biblical teachings about heaven:

The first one is the **Lord's Prayer**, which locates God in this kingdom. *Our Father which art in Heaven*. God moves out of this state of being, this dimension of life, and Jesus calls on God there to help us act in response to God's divine grace. To forgive as we are forgiven; to seek God's will **HERE** as it is in Heaven. The emphasis is clearly on an **earthly realization** of God's will and grace.

The second core teaching is the **Beatitudes** which is a straightforward description of how God's grace comes to us. *Blessed are those who mourn, those who hunger for righteousness, the merciful, the peacemakers, the pure in heart and the poor in spirit, for theirs IS (not theirs will be) the Kingdom of God.*

These next words, which you can't see, are in bold, meaning listen up:

To be "blessed" is to be IN a heavenly state. There is no better description of Heaven, and it is open to us now. You don't have to die!

3. The third part of Jesus' teaching about heaven is in the **Parable of the Last Judgment**, which tells us that God's grace is open to those who have reached out to the stranger, clothed the naked, fed the hungry... In other words, **Basic compassion is the key to heaven, not following some narrow doctrine.**

All these core teachings reinforce Jesus' first statement, namely Repent, the rule of God is at hand, namely here and now. We are called to open our lives to this present reality, this deeper dimension. "Heaven" is not "up there;" it is "in here." (pointing to heart)

Now some will ask: "Well, what about the afterlife?" The central creeds hold to this faith and I still affirm this faith. It need not contradict good science. The universe does conserve energy even as it changes form. Death remains a mystery. What I do know is that the "kingdom" that Jesus proclaimed, is real, it is eternal. I'll trust God in whatever comes.

But then I move on to John 14 which is in sharp contrast to Jesus' view of heaven. John writes a century after Jesus' death. And he presumes to speak for Jesus through the early church: all those statements of "I am the vine, the way, the truth and the light." That's John speaking for Jesus, and alas, he does buy into the Ptolemaic view of a three-story universe. Heaven is a palace with many mansions; namely, the "old heaven. "

Then we come to that incredible text that closes out the Bible, the Revelation of St. John. It can be seen as a visionary imagining of the future for Christians:

St John sees the City of God, a city in which there are no temples, following it up with these words: Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and a new Jerusalem is coming to be. And a loud voice says: BEHOLD! The dwelling of God is within us all, God will dwell here, and WE shall be his people.

Could it be any sharper? St John draws a line between the reign of God's grace in Christ and the old visions of heaven. The old heavens have passed away. Mr. Sagan would concur. The pearly gates and the streets of gold, the yellow Cadillacs and the 72 virgins. They are all gone!

This next paragraph is also in bold which means listen up again!

The choice before the church today is whether to believe Jesus - that the reign of God is here and now, that the "dwelling place of God is within us", namely inside this human embodied existence, and it shines gloriously whenever we show compassion and struggle for righteousness and own up to our own poverty of spirit so the grace of God can get into those empty spaces.

I hope these words have provoked you enough to go back to the Gospels - especially Matthew, Mark and Luke. Note the immediacy of the Gospel: the time is at hand, the reign of God is within you, the old heaven and the old earth have passed away.

We can now read our Bibles with both heart and mind and discern the breaking in of that grace ...even now, even here!

AMEN! Let it be!"

Hi Elizabeth,

Thanks for your kind words -- Dad was ready to go, and he prepared us well for his death (as did his sermons, and all that Faulkner). I'm so grateful we had him for so long. As far as the Sage pulpit, I remember John Cleese, Peter Gomes, and James Forbes (of Riverside Church in NYC) as some of the big ones. Dad was also instrumental in the Dalai Lama's visit to Cornell, and that's the most prominent photograph he had displayed in the house.

For most of Dad's tenure at Cornell United Religious Works, we were kids, and I remember much more clearly the people who worked in Anabel Taylor Hall than I do the visiting speakers! I'm so pleased & moved to know that his sermons are still living in Forest Home Chapel -- he so admired & loved that church and congregation.

All Best, Luke Johnson, Bob's eldest of four sons