

## **HEAVEN ON EARTH**

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, July 2, 2017  
Based on Isaiah 2:2-4, Matthew 6:23-27***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a summer sermon series entitled, “The Hope of Heaven.” In this series, we have been considering fundamental questions such as: Is there an afterlife? If so, how is life beyond death possible? What is the relationship between time and eternity? In what form would we be in eternity? We will continue in future weeks to consider many further aspects of heaven, such as: What is heaven like? Who can go to heaven? Can non-Christians go to heaven? What about the wicked? Is there a hell? And how do we truly know what to believe? You can understand why the series will continue through August.

This morning, we will be taking an excursion for one week away from the idea of the afterlife to consider another important aspect of the whole idea of heaven, namely: Is it possible in some sense to create heaven on earth? This is especially appropriate to consider on Independence Day weekend, because many of the early founders of our nation hoped that this country might in some way reflect God’s Kingdom. But of course there have been many human efforts throughout history to create a kind of heaven on earth; and most of those efforts were disasters. Today we will consider what the Scriptures tell us about the potential for achieving heaven on earth. Let us begin with a moment of prayer—.

In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus teaches us to pray, “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” (Matthew 6:10) Clearly, according to Jesus, the aim of Jesus’ followers should be not simply to get ourselves into a heaven beyond this world; our aim should also be to bring something of heaven into this world. When we pray for God’s Kingdom to come on earth, we are praying for God’s rule and God’s principles to be established now in this world, which means we are praying for the vision of Isaiah to be reality—that vision where people say, “Come, let us go up the mountain of the Lord, that He may teach us his ways and we may walk in his paths . . . nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.” It is a vision of a world living in righteousness and wholeness and peace.

According to Isaiah, the first step in realizing such a vision is to “go up the mountain of the Lord.” In other words, one must begin with faith and devotion to God. This explains some of the historical failures in human efforts to create heaven on earth; those efforts have completely failed whenever people have left God out of the picture. The classic example of that in the past couple centuries was certainly the philosophy of Karl Marx, who drew heavily on the Biblical vision when imagining what he hoped the world would become—a place of harmony and well-being and mutual sharing and peace—but who took God completely out of the picture. Indeed Marx imagined that eliminating religion was a key step toward achieving paradise on earth; and so Marxist societies, from the Soviet Union to

Cambodia, were brutal in their efforts to exterminate all forms of faith. Those societies, of course, were disasters, and among the most inhumane in human history. You cannot arrive at heaven without God.

This, however, does not mean that invoking the name of God will guarantee that we start achieving heaven on earth. We see this fact in the current great disaster in human efforts to create heaven on earth—the so-called Islamic caliphate, which loudly trumpets the name of God all the time, and promises its followers that it is creating a godly society, but which has created nothing but hell on earth. But radical Islamism is not the only example of political leaders who have invoked the name of God while creating something very ungodly. Indeed in our own American history, there have been people who professed faith in God who at the same time promoted slavery, accused people of witchcraft, or engaged in numerous other behaviors and policies that were far from heavenly. In fact, religious governments generally have not brought much of paradise on earth. From Oliver Cromwell's England to the current government of Iran, theocratic forms of rule have typically been oppressive and quite un-heavenly.

So when people have tried to create something of heaven on earth, whether they have denied God or invoked God, the common result has been failure. Perhaps our experience of such failure is why dystopian novels and movies are so popular these days. The basic story line—of a utopia gone awry—is what we have witnessed repeatedly in human history.

All this leads some Christians to a fatalistic attitude—to just conclude that this world will always be a mess, and we must simply do the best we personally can, and look toward the world to come. Certainly our human sinfulness means that human beings will never really arrive at heaven on earth. Yet Jesus clearly calls us to something more than resignation to a broken world. If we are to pray for God's Kingdom to come and God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven, we are being called to commit ourselves to work for that day in which God's goodness, God's justice, and God's peace would take hold more fully on this earth. From the Bible, we can discern at least three distinct elements that are keys for moving toward that goal.

The first key element, which we have noted already, is *faith*. We need trust in God, illustrated in Isaiah's image of "going up the mountain of the Lord." Indeed our nation's founders pretty well universally agreed on the critical importance of faith for a prosperous society. As George Washington put it, "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable."

This points also to the second key element; in addition to trust in God, we need *fidelity* to God's values. When Isaiah talked about going up the mountain of the Lord, he followed that by saying, "so that God may teach us His ways, and we may walk in His paths."

Whenever people have proclaimed belief in God but have produced more hell than heaven on earth, the stumbling block has typically been precisely here—people want to invoke God, but they want God’s blessing on *their* ways and *their* chosen paths, and are not so interested in actually walking in God’s ways. In our own American history, politicians have often done this—giving lip service to God while pursuing a political agenda that had little to do with God’s vision for human society. And of course this sort of thing has gone on throughout human history. Thus in the prophet Isaiah, in a passage after the one we heard, the Lord complains, “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me” (Isaiah 29:13); and Jesus would say, “Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of my Father in heaven.” (Matthew 7:21) We need a commitment to pay attention to God’s values and to actually “walk in God’s paths,” as Isaiah says.

But what exactly are God’s values? We find those values in the Scriptures and supremely in the teachings of Jesus, as the Lord calls us to love all people, to care for the poor and needy, to live in harmony and peace together, and to uphold justice for all. But of course we are always imperfect in how exactly we understand and apply those values, and thus we may come up with differing opinions as to what it will look like for a particular society to walk in God’s ways. In this context, the worst scenario unfolds when one group of people decides that they have God figured out and have a corner on God’s values, and the group seeks to impose its interpretation of what is right on everyone else. This is why theocracies have always ended poorly, because in a theocracy it is not actually God’s values that rule, but one group’s narrow interpretation of God’s values.

All this brings us to the final key element in arriving at something of heaven on earth, namely, *freedom*. It is the free interchange of ideas that enables us to come to a greater understanding of God’s call for us all, and to avoid the tyranny of a single viewpoint; and it is the free response to God that enables people to come to authentic faith and a genuine commitment to God’s purpose. Thus in the Bible, from Moses to Jesus, people are invited to freely choose God.

I believe that the genius of America lies in our historic embrace of these three key elements—faith in God, fidelity to God’s values, and freedom. We have found strength as a nation as we have looked to a higher Power, we have gotten on the right track when we have looked to higher values than materialism and self-interest, and we have thrived in freedom. We have been able to experience great blessing in all this. But of course these elements are not guaranteed—human beings have a tendency to forget God, to drift from good values, and to slide into oppressive patterns of power. This is why the church is one of the most important institutions in our society, because the church lifts up faith in God, reminds society of God’s values, and can be a bulwark for freedom.

In the end, heaven on earth is never something that we ourselves can create—it can only unfold by means of the working of God through us—and since we are sinners, heaven never completely unfolds on this earth. Our own American history is full of considerable imperfections. Yet as we join together as God’s people in the church, we can share in the movement of Jesus to let God’s Kingdom come on earth as in heaven. Our society, and our own personal lives, *can* reflect something of heaven, as we look to the Lord in faith, as we walk in God’s ways, and as we let the Spirit of God be at work through us.