

STREETS OF GOLD

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, July 9, 2017
based on Revelation 21:2-6, 10-12, 18-23, 22:1-5***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, “The Hope of Heaven.” Previously in this series we have seen how the Biblical message, culminating in Jesus Christ, affirms plainly that there is an afterlife. We have considered further the New Testament idea that in heaven we will have a “spiritual body” (as Paul expresses it in I Corinthians)—a form that will be different from the body that we have now but which will be much more than a disembodied mind. This means that in heaven we will continue to act and to experience God’s blessings in multiple ways. So the next question that naturally arises is, What exactly will heaven be like? This will be our focus this morning. Let us begin with a moment of prayer. . . .

Throughout the ages, in all different cultures and times, people have imagined heaven. Why there is this universal “sense of heaven” is a question to which we will return next week. But if you look further at *how* people have typically imagined heaven, you can sum it up the popular imagination in a simple phrase—very often, heaven is a projection into eternity of what people wish they were doing right now.

In ancient times, when people had to work very long and hard, people imagined heaven as a place of relaxation. The classic example of this is the Greco-Roman vision of Elysium, the eternal resting place of the righteous, where, as the Greek poet Pindar (5th century B.C.) described it, “The good receive a life free from toil . . . they follow Zeus’ road to the end . . . where ocean breezes blow around the island of the blessed, and flowers of gold are blazing” (Odes). Heaven is thus a place of pleasant repose. Another classic expression of that idea can be found in Mohammed’s vision in the Koran, which says, “They shall recline on jewelled couches, and there shall wait on them immortal youths with bowls and ewers and a cup of purest wine (that will neither pain their heads nor take away their reason); with fruits of their own choice and flesh of fowls that they relish. And theirs shall be the dark-eyed virgins, chaste as hidden pearls . . .” (Koran, sura 56:15-23) There’s been a lot of discussion about that last phrase. Modern suicide bombers are told that if they blow themselves up in the cause of Islam, they’ll get 72 virgins in heaven—the number 72 coming from a later Islamic tradition. But then there was a recent German-language book by Christoph Luxenberg (a pseudonym), which was entitled (in English), “The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran,” (*Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran: Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache*) which argued that the original language of the Koran was actually based in part on the ancient Syriac language that was in use in Mohammed’s tribe, and therefore some words and phrases have been long misunderstood. Specifically, the book argues that the word that has been taken to mean “virgin” actually means “grape” or “raisin.” So in heaven, instead of getting a mob of virgins, what you actually get is a bowl of raisins. That could affect recruitment for terrorists.

This whole discussion reveals a couple of common features in human thinking about heaven. One is that images of heaven generally reflect the cultural context in which they emerged. In the Greco-Roman world, heaven is an island with pleasant ocean breezes. In the ancient Arab world, heaven is soft couches and bowls of fruit. Another very common feature of human ideas about heaven is that people tend to envision heaven as a place where they get all the pleasures that they desire. This feature continues very much in modern imaginings about heaven.

In contemporary life, we spend much less time in hard toil than people used to, and have much more time for recreation; so instead of imagining heaven as a place of yearned-for pleasant rest, we tend to imagine heaven as a place where we get to endlessly pursue our favorite pastime. Heaven is perpetual golf, or sailing, or bridge. For those who like to fish, heaven is a giant lake stocked with walleye with no limit. For downhill skiers, heaven is unending perfect powder. Heaven, once again, is a projection into eternity of what people wish they were doing right now.

In the Bible, the view of heaven is radically different from such imaginings. It is quite striking that in the Bible as a whole, almost nothing is said about what heaven is like. The Old Testament, as we noted in past weeks, says very little about the afterlife and only in its late sections, such as the book of Daniel, does it speak in very general terms about resurrection. In the gospels, the teaching of Jesus about heaven has two distinctive aspects. First, Jesus is absolutely clear that there is an afterlife. Secondly, Jesus offers no descriptions of heaven at all. When Jesus speaks about heaven, he uses symbolic images. He uses the imagery of a wedding banquet on several occasions, and we will return to that image in a future installment of this sermon series. Or in one of his most well-known sayings, he uses the general image of a heavenly home, as he says, "In my Father's house there are many rooms . . . I go to prepare a place for you." (John 14:2)

It is interesting to note what happened in the history of interpretation of that saying. When the New Testament Greek was translated into English in the King James Version in 1611, this verse was rendered as, "In my Fathers' house there are many mansions." (John 14:2) The Greek word translated here as "mansions" is *monai*, which means simply "dwelling place" or "room." The Latin Vulgate translated that into Latin as *mansiones*, which meant "dwelling place" or "room," and this got carried over into King James English as mansions. In 1611 the word "mansion" was often used in England to denote an apartment in a large house. But of course over the centuries the word came to denote solely a whopping estate, and many Christians loved to imagine that in heaven Jesus is going to give each of us our own private mansion.

So in the popular imagination, people have liked to imagine either that heaven is a place where I get to do lots of fun things or that heaven is a place where I get lots of great stuff. In short, the popular conception of heaven is typically me-centered.

In sharp contrast, the Biblical view of heaven is God-centered. The Bible is clear that we will arrive into real fulfillment and profound joy only as we come into fellowship with God. In this light, there are two good reasons why Biblical descriptions of heaven are scant

and purely symbolic. First, the Bible says little about what heaven is like because heaven simply is beyond our comprehension. For us to try to understand heaven is tantamount to people in a two-dimensional world trying to comprehend a three-dimensional universe. It is just beyond our understanding—far more extraordinary and spectacular than we can begin to imagine—and so the Bible simply points in a general way toward heaven. The other good reason why Biblical descriptions of heaven are scant and symbolic is because people tend to want to focus on the great stuff they think they are going to get instead of focusing upon God. Suicide bombers are interested in those 72 virgins and not so interested really in God. Some Christians got very interested the real estate they expected to get. But the Bible is sparse in heavenly descriptions so that we do not get hung up the details but focus our vision upon God.

Thus when the Bible finally does offer a vision of heaven, in its closing pages in the book of Revelation, the vision is God-centered and highly symbolic. The vision is found in Revelation 21 and 22; it is the vision of the heavenly city, the “New Jerusalem.” (*I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God . . . Rev. 21:2*)

The vision is loaded with symbolic imagery. The city is described as a perfect cube—being twelve thousand stadia, that is, about 1500 miles, in length, breadth, and height. (*The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its breadth; the city measure 12,000 stadia—its length, breadth, and height are equal. Rev. 21:16*) This is obvious symbolism, which indicates the perfection and completeness of heaven, and the enormous size says that there is room in heaven for all. The construction of the city is fantastic. The streets, we are told, are pure gold (*The street of the city was pure gold . . . Rev. 21:21*), not the best road surface really; but it is a great image not only of the purity and the glory of the heaven but of the fact that the things which we consider valuable on this earth are so far surpassed in heaven that gold would be a mere paving material. The gates of the city are each constructed out of a single huge pearl (*The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made out of a single pearl Rev. 21:21*)—hence the “pearly gates”—which is also a picture of the glory of heaven; but what is particularly significant is that fact that there are twelve gates. The number 12 in the Bible is a symbol for the whole people of God—since there were 12 tribes and 12 disciples—and thus the 12 gates represent all of God’s people being drawn together. The foundations of the city walls are likewise adorned with jewels; and we are given a detailed listing of the specific jewels. (*The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with every jewel; the first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst. Rev. 21:20*) Again this is intentional symbolism. The twelve jewels named correspond to twelve precious stones which, in the Old Testament, were mounted in the breastplate that the high priest wore in the temple; those stones represented the twelve tribes of Israel. The Revelation gemstones also corresponded in the first century to the twelve signs of the Zodiac and thus the birth signs of all the tribes of the peoples of the earth. In modern terms, these were the birthstones of all humanity. Again this is symbolism indicating that heaven is a gathering together of all people; and of course this is the basic idea

suggested in the very picture of heaven as a city. The urban imagery of course does not mean that heaven is literally a city, but the city image says that heaven will be a *community* of people. The clear message is that heaven is experienced as people share in a welcoming and loving fellowship with one another. This is a fundamental concept to which we will return later in this sermon series.

The city image also suggests that heaven is an active place. This is a very important concept, because people so often have wanted to imagine heaven as something static—that you are just floating around on a cloud in heaven, which would get very boring—but the heavenly city image tells us that heaven is a realm bustling with activity, a place where people continue to interact with one another, to develop, and to grow.

A further important image is in Revelation 22—the image of the river of the water of life which flows from God’s throne through the middle of the city. (*The river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flows from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. Rev. 22:1-2*) This image actually carries forth a vision of the prophet Ezekiel, who had spoken of a great river flowing from the throne of God. In the Bible, water is a symbol of cleansing, renewal, and life—symbolism that is encapsulated in the sacrament of baptism—and so the image of the river of life speaks of how heaven is a sharing in the abundant life of God. The image declares further that on the banks of the river grow the tree of life (*On either side of the river stands the tree of life . . . (Rev. 22:2)*). The tree of life was pictured in the opening pages of Genesis in the Garden of Eden; but when Adam and Eve were banished from the garden, the tree was no more to be seen. That was a picture of how human beings, in our sinfulness, become cut off from life. But now, in heaven, the tree of life is present again. The vision thus declares that in heaven—made possible through Jesus Christ—humanity is restored into a right relationship with God and is brought thereby into eternal life.

This brings us finally to the essence of heaven, which is clearly declared at the beginning of the vision and reiterated at the end. At the beginning of the heavenly city vision we are told, “I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling of God is with people. God will dwell with them, and they shall be His people; God Himself will be with them, God will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more . . .” (Rev. 21:3-4). Then at the end the vision declares, “Night shall be no more; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they shall reign forever and ever.” (Rev. 22:5) In short, the essence of heaven is to dwell with God. We find our ultimate fulfillment as we enter into fellowship with God and live in the light of God.

All this tells us a great deal not only about our final destiny, but how we can find something of heaven today. So often people imagine that they will find a bit of heaven on earth if they can get a big enough house or a lot of great stuff or endless entertainments—notions which, as we have seen, have carried forward into popular ideas about heaven itself. But none of these things can ever really satisfy. Heaven finally is found in God. The good news is that by the saving grace of Jesus Christ we can enter today into the love of God, we can get a kind of a foretaste of the community of heaven by sharing today in

the fellowship of God's people in the church, and by God's power we can take part, as we noted last week, in creating something of heaven in the world around us. So as we lift our lives to the Lord, we can not only live in the hope for that eternal city, but something of the New Jerusalem can shine already through our lives today.