

Easter 6C 2013

The Revelation to John 21:9-22:5

Even as a priest, I find it difficult to talk about a place called heaven unless I'm talking with the pre-school children in chapel. Even then, I'm very aware of the parents in the last third of the pews and wonder what they're thinking when I talk about heaven. Christians, non-Christians, and those who identify with no religious tradition are very skeptical when they hear talk of heaven. Sometimes they roll their eyes or suppress a smile. At times in the past, I've rolled my own eyes and suppressed a smile.

Does heaven really exist? What does it look like if it does exist? A place of verdant hills and clear streams of water where the lamb lies with the lion and all of the creatures of God love each other and live in peace and harmony – like that Coca-Cola song, “I'd like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony...”? Is heaven a place and does it have a location? Like maybe “up there”?

This morning we hear an expanded passage from The Revelation to John. We hear a relatively specific description of the City of Heaven, where God and Jesus – the Lamb – sit on the Holy Throne. How glorious the City is – we hear a description of the jeweled foundations, the pearls that make up the gates, the streets of gold, the life-giving river of life flowing through the city with trees of knowledge on both sides of the river. The city gates are always open, the light of God keeps away any darkness, and there are no temples or churches because God permeates the city – there is no need for humans to go to a place where the nexus between heaven and earth exist.

Over the many millennia of recorded human history we hear of a place where human beings may go after their time in this world is finished. Sometimes it's described as a physical place – the Egyptians made sure their dead had everything they would need to make this journey. Sometimes it's described as a spiritual place, a place to which our souls and spirits transition. I remember an episode of the original Star Trek in which the people of another planet were scripted to die at a certain age. A going away party would be held for them, and they would walk away from the community into the hills, to be taken to a beautiful place that was their heaven. When Captain Kirk and his crew followed one of those who began the journey toward a new life in heaven, they found a place that had sub-zero temperatures with howling winds – totally unlivable. And as they looked around they found skeletons and frozen bodies of those who had made the walk to the land of milk and honey. The place that the people thought was one thing was actually a place that resulted in a physical and painful death – this place was the end of the line and there was nothing beyond.

That story caused me great concern because it made me wonder if heaven – life after death – was just a big scam. We all know that there are many people who believe just that: Heaven is a scam believed by people who don't want to die or who need to be comforted. As Marx said, religion is the opiate of the masses and tells them what they want to hear. These same people believe that this life is all there is and that when our bodies die, there is no more. Heaven exists for people who need to believe that their souls and spirits actually do live on. There is no scientific evidence, however, to prove the existence of heaven and anecdotal experience is determined by science and skeptics to be not acceptable.

Are we so arrogant that we dismiss the possibility of another dimension, of the existence of a soul and spirit, of a place where we continue on in the light of the creator – just because we have no physical evidence or we haven't had enough scientific trials testing this “theory”?

As a Christian, I believe that anecdotal experience is quite acceptable. Not everything must be proven according to post-enlightenment, scientific standards. Faith is not a science. We learn about our spiritual selves through our oral history and our sacred texts and our personal experiences and stories. When there is congruency among those areas, I suggest that there is sufficient anecdotal evidence to take a spiritual dimension – a fourth dimension, if you will – very seriously indeed. We do believe that our souls – our spirits – are the essence of who we are as human beings. And we believe that our souls – our spirits – do not die even when our physical bodies can live no longer.

Short of citing all of the research into oral history and sacred texts relating to heaven, I think it is easy enough to get a taste of what's out there by Googling some of the more contemporary research and exegesis about these two

areas. On the topic of anecdotal evidence, though, I and many clergy can certainly speak to this, as can many who are in the medical professions or who are involved with hospice. We have seen the transitions of those near death, we have heard their conversations with those on the “other side,” we have seen the peace and lack of fear in their faces as they get closer to death, we have heard their desire to move on toward the Light. On the other hand, in a couple of instances I have seen and heard the fear of some who have been incredibly afraid to die – those experiences are such that I am not comfortable even talking about them. But more often than not, the transitions that I have witnessed have been such that death is not a thing to fear. The fear is for the living who will no longer see their loved one.

For those who need at least a smattering of scientific evidence, I strongly suggest you read the book by neurosurgeon Dr. Eban Alexander called “Proof of Death.”¹ Not only does Dr Alexander provide a very clear description of his comatose experience during which his doctors declared him brain dead, but he provides an appendix to his book that provides scientific responses to those colleagues and others who have scientific problems with his experience. Understand that before his experience, Alexander was convinced that the concept of heaven was worthless and should be dismissed, that after-death experiences were “subconscious hallucinations created by the neocortex based on memories of what the person had previously heard or imagined about the afterlife.”² Alexander is no longer a skeptic but “a faithful Episcopalian” and someone who continues to share his story.

The messages he received while experiencing heaven are what we constantly hear from God in our sacred writings:

- We are loved and cherished, dearly, forever.
- We have nothing to fear.
- There is nothing we can do wrong [once we are in God’s presence].³

We don’t always need scientific trials and proofs that some things exist. I suggest to you that this is one of those times. The anecdotal evidence along with our faith and trust in an ever-present God provides us with the assurance that God will meet God’s promises to the humanity that the Creator made in love and in the holy image.

We have a loving God, a loving creator who continues to love us and gather us once our time in this place is finished. We have a forgiving God who knows always what is in our hearts and loves us so much as to give us the Holy Spirit to guide us as God’s hands and voice while we move through our lives. We are never alone, even when our family and friends may abandon us because God is constantly with us. And God’s promise of eternal life is just that – a promise and an offer of a life that is more glorious, more peaceful, more loving, than anything we could ever – even in our wildest dreams – imagine.

Amen.

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¹ Eban Alexander, *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon’s Journey into the Afterlife*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012.

² *Homiletics*, May 2013, p 10.

³ *Ibid.*