

Christ Church Sermons

Frist Sunday of Advent, December 2, 2007

The Reverend Nancy J. Allison

Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122; Romans 12:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44

“ Hope For All The Saints

Today is the first Sunday of Advent and almost the end of our sermon series on “Hope.” But, fear not, Hope is the very stuff of Advent. Hope is the dominate theme of all the Advent lessons. Today, the call is to “Cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.” Not any light, but God’s light. God’s glory is about to break into the darkness of our world. The time is so close that if we turn around in repentance and trust we will see, even now, the dawn of his coming. Darkness may still enslave the peoples, and thick darkness may still cloud our minds and hearts. But, the song of the angels is already in the air. The Savior is coming. And, in that day, heaven and earth will meet. And, when they do, the things of earth will pass away – or, if we are willing to come out of ourselves and meet Him, the things of earth will begin to be transformed into those things that abide forever more.

My job today is to proclaim The Hope of Heaven. And, the first thing that needs to be said is that Heaven is nearer than we think. Heaven, even now, is tapping on our shoulder, begging us to turn around and pay it some attention. The Hope of Heaven may be in the future, but you better get your ticket now. And, that’s another thing; most of the ways we talk about Heaven are just ridiculous. We can’t help it, I suppose. All the images we have to work with come from the things of earth. But, just for starters, Heaven is not a place – at least not a physical place. It is a State of Grace. Heaven is not up there or out there. Heaven is Real Life – “Eternal Life in our enjoyment of God.” That’s the Prayer Book definition. “By heaven, we mean eternal life in our enjoyment of God.” – page 862, check it out!

But, is that it? Is that all? What about the mansions in the sky? What about the Pearly Gates and the Golden Streets? They’re in the Bible, after all, along with a lot of other weird things – like the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, and the Anti-Christ with the 666 on his forehead, and the way people are divided between those who have the mark of the Beast

and those who are sealed on their foreheads as servants of the Living God. A huge media market has been created by exploiting these simple Biblical pictures of the end-times. Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins are multi-millionaires through their Left Behind series of books and films. If you haven't read them, I'm not encouraging it. But, still, I have to admit that I got up to volume four before I finally stopped. They are that addictive.

The pictures of Heaven and Hell that come to us from the Bible, and particularly from the book of Revelation, are incredibly powerful and appeal to something deep within our human psyche. We might mock them, but, somehow, Heaven is not Heaven unless some kind of great sorting out process happens. Heaven is not good, and it is not of God, unless an ultimate justice precedes that final state. Before the Gates of Heaven open, the wrongs of this world must be righted. The poor and the meek must be raised up; the haughty and proud laid low. The crooked must be made straight. The wounds must be healed. And, all the tears wiped away from our eyes. How this is done, or what form it will take is beyond our power to know. All our images of these Last Things are vain – including the pictures that come to us from the Bible.

In fact the Hebrew Scripture shows very little interest in life beyond death. For the Old Testament, this is the world in which God is to reign. This is the place where justice must be done. Heaven and Hell are here before they are hereafter. God calls us in this world. And, if we walk with God here, we will go from strength to strength wherever that leads.

I think this is a very good corrective picture to keep in mind when we try to sort out our own hopes and dreams about Heaven. When Abraham, the Father of all the Faithful, is called to be The Friend of God, the call is to "Leave your land, and your kindred, and your father's house, and go to the land that I will show you." The trouble with much of our hope for Heaven is that it is a hope to hang on to what we have in this world and never to really leave it. Personally, my choice is to wake up after death without a lot of change to who I am now. Heaven will be the best parts of North Carolina, and Pennsylvania, and Scotland all rolled into one – and we'll sit around eating barbeque, black-eyed-peas and Haggis. My loved ones will be there, and the annoying people I never liked will be off in some separate section – if they get in at all. Well, lots of luck! The great 20th century theologian, Karl Barth, was once asked whether we would see our loved ones again in heaven. "Oh, yes" he said, "but not just the loved ones."

Here I turn again to the Book of Common Prayer for help – same page, 862. It says of The Communion of Saints – by which it means every one who is in Heaven or on the way to Heaven – that it is “the whole family of God, the living and the dead, those whom we love AND those whom we hurt, bound together in Christ by sacrament, prayer, and praise.” Well, Nuts! Why do they have to be there? I know they weren’t really bad people, but *Gees Louise*, they sure were aggravating. Is my failure towards them going to haunt me forever? Or, will my inability to love, and care, and honor them have to be fixed somehow?

Well, that's pretty much what Christian faith says. If we are to be the friends of God, somewhere along the great pilgrimage of life we had better learn that God is not just for us and those we like – nor is the gift of our own life given just to please ourselves. Human beings do not grow or come into fullness of life until we open ourselves in communion with others. Our task in this world, and no doubt in the world to come, is The Ministry of Reconciliation. We are servants and ambassadors for the atoning, redeeming power of God in this world – and that includes every individual human being no matter how failed or flawed. This is the work of the whole church in Heaven and on earth. We pray for each other. We help each other. We are united to each other. Those in Heaven pray for us – as we pray for them. Both here and there we pray that we will “go from strength to strength in a life of perfect service in thy kingdom.” Both here and there, the work of redemption continues.

The Episcopal Church almost never uses the word “Purgatory.” It sounds harsh and joyless, thanks, in part, to Dante and some of the weirder ideas of the Medieval Church. But, that doesn't mean that we think the work of redemption doesn't continue after death. It does. Slowly, quietly, patiently, mysteriously, beyond the limits of our understanding, all that God has made, and all that God loves, is being brought to its perfection. We are all called into Love, by Love. The call of God's friendship is always the call into greater and deeper Love. In this life we may shrink from those demands, yet the love of God is such that it will not let us go. Step by step, we will be changed. Somewhere along the journey that brings us Home, we will be transformed by Love.

And, what is Home, except the fullness of Love for which we were made? Here, despite what I just said, Dante is a big help in picturing this homecoming. The soul that willingly responds to God, says Dante – and this is pretty much standard Christianity – will find that the whole purpose of life's journey is to grow in trust and love. The transformation that takes place is to cast off fear and to let go of all the clinging, controlling behavior that

keeps us stuck in the whirlpools of our own delusions, mired in our past, and unable to move on towards the great consummation of Love. So, for Dante, the entrance into Heaven occurs the moment we, as the saying is, "Let go and Let God." Heaven engulfs us the moment we are light enough to be lifted out of ourselves. Like an arrow shot from the bow, so the soul that is freed from its heaviness rises instantly into the Light and Perfect Joy of God's Presence. Fear and anxiety, envy and hatred, anger and shame simply fall away. And, our true self emerges on its own native soil. There, Dante – and I might add, Saint Paul, as well – says that the seed that was planted in us at our making, germinates and flowers in all its fullness. Dante's picture is of the perfect rose unfolding in the pure Light of Heaven. St. Paul speaks of "the grain of wheat that falls to the earth and dies" – "but if it dies," he says, "it will bear much fruit."

Heaven is that harvest time. Heaven is the homecoming of pilgrim souls; the in-gathering of just men and women, made perfect; of faithful laborers, given rest; of sinners, transformed by love. Heaven is the Joy and Great Thanksgiving for which our lives are made. Heaven is the Banquet of the Kingdom which, even now, we share in Eucharist and song with all the living and the dead who gather round the throne of God. Heaven is to put on Christ, the one who has already borne our griefs and carried our sorrows, the one who already knows and understands us through and through. He is the one who will welcome us home. And, his greeting, "Well done, good and faithful servant," will be the blessing that wipes away all the tears from our eyes.

This is our journey. This is our anchor and our life-line. Brothers and sisters, let us lay hold of the Hope of Heaven and follow it Home.