

Pastor T.C. Arnold
Last Sunday in the Church Year
Isaiah 65:17-25
November 20th, 2011

What will heaven be like? A Scottish physician was attending a close personal friend in the friend's last hours. The dying man asked, "What will it be like after I die?"

Just then there was a scratching at the door. The doctor said, "Hear that? That's my dog. He's been waiting downstairs for me, and he's grown impatient. He's never been in this room. He has no idea what it's like. He knows only one thing about this room: that I'm here. That's all I know about what heaven will be like. HE is there."

Of course, in heaven we will be in the presence of the Lord. What glory and majesty awaits our heavenly union to come on our last day. Let's be clear. The presence of God does exist today for you and me in Christ Jesus. He comes to you – in this sinful, dreadful world. He comes and He is "*with you always to the very end of the age.*"

But what we wait for – look forward to – is being in the presence of God where there is no sin, no hate, no worry, no death, and no daily troubles. This day in the church-year is the last Sunday of the Church Year. Yes, we speak of the end times during these last days. The readings for today give us a picture of the last days. Isaiah says in the Old Testament text for today, "*Behold, I will create a new heaven and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create...*"

Is it at all a comfort to you to hear these words, "*The former things will not be remembered...*"? It is to me. Most every bit of anger deep within me – most every regret for what I have said and what I have done – most every impure thought, most every spiteful action comes about because of what I remember happened. I say this about myself, but I'm sure I could put your name in the place of mine with such things. We, along with this world, are really good at remembering. The unbelieving world will sometimes remember the Word of God even better than you.

You see, some 750 years after Isaiah, St. Peter wrote: "*You must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say 'Where is this "coming" He promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation'*" (2 Peter 3:3-4).

Today there are many who belittle the faithful and our belief in heaven. According to those who say such things as are in the 2 Peter text, Christians are completely out of touch with reality; their heads are so high in the clouds that their feet are no longer on earth. So someone today will scoff: "You mean you really believe all that stuff in that old book? Literally? I suppose you believe in the tooth fairy too!" Christians are made out to be foolish prey for rich and greedy shysters who take their money and feed them lies. Such terrible ideas formed in the minds of men who try to cut at the foundation of faith are damaging to those who are weak and even those who are strong.

But to the faithful who live in Christ each day of our days – in the incarnate Word, Jesus the Savior – we are assured of the heavenly reality. We are gifted these treasures each day as we live our days in such words that Jesus spoke on Maundy Thursday, "*Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are*

many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going to prepare a place for you. And ... I will come back and take you to be with me." (John 14:1-3). Jesus will come back. The blessed hope of a new heaven and a new earth that Isaiah and St. John talks about is a promise for you and me. It's a glorious promise that is real. And because it is a promise for you and me, we can be confident that the words we hear about our Lord coming again as "Judgment Day" are not words of threat to you, the faithful children of God. They are words of promise and hope. They are words that cause us to pray, "Come Lord Jesus quickly. We are waiting for you."

Isaiah, in the text for today, pictures heaven as a place marked by the end of mortality. Dare to imagine no more stillbirths, crib deaths, fatal accidents, or diseases of children. Imagine never gathering at a graveside to mourn someone who died "too young." In heaven people will do what God created and intended us to do – live forever.

Isaiah looked again and saw heaven as a place marked by the end of frustration. Dare to imagine people in joyous satisfaction. Dare to imagine no theft, deterioration, nothing becoming obsolete, no war to rob us of the produce of our hands in God's new heavens and earth. In heaven the futility that sin brought on this present world will vanish.

Dare to imagine a place marked by the end of hostility. Dare to imagine the wolf and the lamb feeding together in peace. Creation's instinct to survive will never again mean doing it by killing or destroying anyone or anything else.

Dare to imagine a place marked by the end of evil and iniquity. Dare to imagine life without temptation to sin because there is no more tempter – he is banished from the new Eden (heaven). Can you imagine such a glorious place?

Luther once said, "I would not give up one moment in heaven for all the joy and riches of the world, even if it lasted for thousands and thousands of years." Beloved, in this vale of tears we call the world we are waiting for something far better. I have been saying "dare to imagine" it – but it's not imaginary. What goes beyond our ability to understand anything to be like in this fallen world today – is our heavenly home. What was won for us on the worst of days – a day we call "good" – has given us the best of life that never ends. What was won for us in death has given us life. What was accomplished on a mount outside of Jerusalem has given us the glory of a heavenly home that Isaiah and St. John call the new Jerusalem. This new Jerusalem is not a new earthly kingdom that Jesus will reign for a thousand years as some believe. Rather, the new Jerusalem is the kingdom to come – our heavenly kingdom – that we dare to imagine today – but we know is our hope and promise in Christ.

"What will heaven be like," asks the man to his friend the physician. Perhaps we dare to imagine ourselves. We can't ever imagine all the glory and all the brilliance and all the contentment that will be before us in heaven. But we do know this – it is before us. And for that reason, we rejoice. It's not a dare to dream. It's not a dare to imagine. It's for real. And for the children of God – for you – It's yours. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen