

August 25th: Heaven

Good morning again, traveling companions. Earlier this summer, we began a new journey together—our sermon series titled “Dis[place]d: Finding Home Together.” This series is meant to be a sojourn into the biblical story, and a tool to help each of us identify the displacement in our own lives, so that we might find comfort in God’s promise of a future home.

When Pastor Heather introduced this topic, she defined this concept of displacement for us, saying that to displace something is to remove it from its usual or proper place, and this can apply to both tangible things like individuals and intangible things like emotions. Displacement can be temporary or permanent, but often the same underlying feelings apply to this sense of disorientation and confusion. So if you are with us this morning and identify with any of those feelings, or are going through an experience of displacement in your life, we invite you to enter into this time of meditation with an openness to God’s presence and the peace that is waiting for you in this place.

With all of that in mind, would you pray with me before we jump in?

Eternal God, we are all too aware that our world is not the way you created it to be. We know that our struggles and pains and displacements were not part of your original plan—you wanted health and wholeness for all of creation. When we feel overwhelmed by the brokenness we experience, remind us that your Holy Spirit is at work in and through us, and that we can find hope in the plans you have for us. Draw near to us today and comfort our anxious hearts so that we can trust in your promises for a better future. Amen.

How many of you regularly think about heaven? And how many of you have thought about heaven in the past few weeks?

I admit that it’s a topic that doesn’t cross my mind all that often—which might be strange for a pastor—but I have been thinking about it more recently. And

that's because this series on displacement has led me to think more deeply about what it looks like to come together as God's people and share in the same hopes and dreams for the future. And those hopes and dreams are necessary, because our current struggles and situations can sometimes be too much for us to bear without a light at the end of the tunnel. We'll get to that in a minute, but first I want to give us a little recap of the work we've done so far.

Over the past few months, we've talked about how painful it can be to exist in our world of destruction and diaspora. We've talked about how difficult it can be to lose sight of our purpose, or how difficult it can be to navigate situations of large scale change in our culture. We've talked about what it takes to move to a new place, and what it looks like to be transformed by the belonging we find in God's love.

In all of these biblical stories, we've affirmed that displacement is hard. We've articulated that change of all kinds is hard. We've shared that transitions into something new are hard. But we've also affirmed that disciples of Jesus are born to do hard things. The characters we've met in our biblical stories were created and empowered to do hard things. And so I have every faith that we can do hard things too, my friends.

So, let's get back to this idea of heaven—and how it can help us on our journey of doing hard things.

When you think about heaven, what comes to mind? Are there beautiful mansions built on clouds? Do you think of gold paved streets and everyone walking around in flowing white robes? Do you imagine a field of wildflowers, or a little cabin by a softly flowing stream, or a big family reunion where you never run out of your grandma's award-winning dessert?

I think all of us, either intentionally or unintentionally, have some kind of vision in our heads about what heaven is like. We might not be able to describe it out loud, but we can feel it—we see the light, we hear the music, we smell the freshly baked baguettes and freshly churned butter, right?

Our culture has a lot to say about heaven—and over the centuries humans have come up with all kinds of ideas about this otherworldly place. We have books, TV shows, movies, paintings, poems, symphonies, and more that make attempts to portray it—it seems like every age and every generation desires an answer for what happens to us after we pass into eternity. We all want to know if the afterlife is real, don't we?

Unfortunately, having never been there myself, I can't guarantee that heaven is 100% legit. That's where faith comes in. Our Christian faith believes that this concept of a place that is better than our current world does exist—even if we can't see it, feel it, touch it, hear it, or smell it just yet.

However, our Bible does have some description of what we can expect from this transcendent experience—and we might be surprised that this image of heaven doesn't exactly match our cultural ideas and dreams. One passage that provides some specific details about heaven comes from the Book of Revelation—the last book of our Bible. In this final piece of scripture directed to the early church, we hear that there is hope for these disciples who are facing displacements such as persecution, life in diaspora, and the confusion of a new spiritual movement. In particular, we can look to Revelation 21 for a vision of how God is at work despite these situations of fear, anxiety, change, and transition.

Our passage begins with this statement from our biblical author: "Then I saw 'a new heaven and a new earth,' for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband."

The vision continues: "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.'

He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

This sounds pretty good so far, right? This is what we want to hear, yes? It sounds wonderful that in heaven God will be right there with humanity, just as close as they were at the beginning of time when God first placed humans in the garden. It sounds incredible that this heaven will be a place where sadness, death, and pain will all disappear. It sounds beautiful that all of these old things will be gone, and they will be replaced by joy.

But wait, because there’s more good news for us.

In verse 5, we hear this statement—which has become a sort of touchstone for me in my own spiritual life. It’s a verse that I come back to when I feel lost or hopeless, so I hope it speaks to you too. Our text says, “He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’ Then he said, ‘Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.’”

God literally says: “I am making everything new.” Let’s just think about that for a moment. When God says, “I am making everything new,” that means every single person on earth is being made new—you, me, your annoying neighbor, your least favorite coworker, your best friend, your kids, everybody. When God says, “I am making all things new,” that means that all things are being made new—nature, our relationships, our systems, everything.

And this movement towards newness is something that we can trust, because it is something that is true.

Here’s why I love this.

To me, this says that the arrival of heaven is synonymous with personal and collective transformation. The arrival of heaven happens because old things have passed away and new things have been created—heaven is part of this cycle of renewal that is part of God’s intention for the world. And to take this

even further, heaven isn't just a place that we can look forward to in some distant future, it's something that is gradually coming into being right now. God's divine action is creating heaven, right now. We might not see it yet, but heaven is happening now. We might not feel it yet, but heaven is coming into being at this very moment.

But I think we should also understand that this act of creation and re-creation isn't always easy. Revelation 21 says that in order for heaven to be realized, old things have to pass away. This passage tells us that old ways, old behaviors, old mindsets, and old systems need to be transformed. In order to build a place where there are no tears, no pain, no death, no fear, no anxiety, there has to be a shift away from those things—we can't get to this place of renewal and divine presence without some sense of loss. We have to let go of certain things to make room for what God is bringing into being. We have to experience change in order for something new to arrive. And even if this creates a sense of displacement, we need to trust that God has a bigger purpose in mind—we need to trust that heaven is on the other side of what we're currently going through.

In fact, I want us to consider that this kind of displacement could be a sign of divine action—a sign that God is at work. So if you're experiencing a shift in your routines, focus or purpose, I invite you to consider if this could be a sign that new things are already arriving in our midst. If you're dealing with some emotions that feel scary and new, I invite you to think about the possibility that the change that you're going through could be a sign of good things to come. If there's some part of you that is reacting to your current displacement with anxiety, I invite you to consider if the transition you've been resisting could be a sign that God is working behind the scenes to bring something new into existence in your life.

I know this sounds a little difficult to wrap our brain around—because displacement and change and transition is so often tied to negative experiences and outcomes—but I really do believe that God's action of making all things new is for our individual and collective good.

As you think about this gradual movement towards heaven, you might want to go home today and spend some time this week with these questions:

What is God making new for you or your family right now?

How is God bringing renewal to you or to your community through that change?

Even when you feel disoriented or displaced, are you able to see little glimpses of heaven starting to peek through?

In moments of tension or confusion, where can you look to see God at work?

I know that some aspects of life feel hard right now, and some things are weighing heavy on us, but if we have faith that heaven is close at hand, we can live our lives with hope for right now and not some distant future.

I know that change is difficult to navigate, but if we choose to see newness and growth as part of God's plan, we can find the strength to join in with this divine transformation.

I know that there is a lot that we are struggling with, but if we trust that God is at work, we can go into our week with a renewed vision for our world—a world without pain or suffering or injustice or violence. That world isn't just possible, it's the culmination of God's kingdom here on earth.

My friends, heaven is happening now because God is making all things new. May you be made new this week in some way, and may you see a glimpse of the glory that God has in store for us.
Amen.

