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Heavens: A sermon preached February 8, 2008
John 14: 1-3, 11-19; 25-27

Please pray with me: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen. (Ps 19: 4)

What is your core, automatic conception of heaven?

Clouds and harps – peaceful stillness after noisy life? Saint Peter at the gate, at the end of the journey? Reunion with family and friends – even with people you might not have gotten along with so well here – somehow it's better there?

Where is heaven? Up? That's where we're conditioned to find Paradise – in the words of Scripture, in art, in conventional wisdom and everyday idioms, we conceive of heaven skyward.

I remember nights as a little girl in the Adirondacks, when I couldn't sleep. I'd sometimes take a blanket off my bed and sneak down to the end of the long and creaky wooden dock, make a nest for myself and lie on my back, working myself into a trance, my eyes in and out of focus, trying to remember the magical sounding names I'd been taught: Cassiopeia, Pleiades

Eventually, Dad would come looking for me and slump me, fast asleep, over his shoulder, and I'd awaken back in my own bed the next morning. Or, I'd wake up covered with dew and find *him* asleep in a beach chair, and have to listen to his grumbling about aches and pains for the whole day, knowing that we'd shared something special.

Dad was the one who taught me the names of the constellations. Dad is also the one who spoke to me most often of faith, as I recall. I conflated these two lesson plans. It's as if astronomy was the means by which, if you were planning on moving to New York City some day, you would know the difference between the Upper West Side and Staten Island.¹

Home in heaven as in the Gospel reading this morning seems the most familiar understanding of heaven. Hospice workers say that when a dying person is ready, he or she will often refer to death as "going home." Heaven is a mansion filled with many rooms – rooms of familiar people, smells of familiar foods, music you heard in the womb. Other rooms are there, for people with *other* evocative memories, tastes and

sounds, but us - *we're* each in the same room with *our* loved ones, spirits, gathered together.

(Play Carrie Newcomer song: *Gathering of Spirits*, words and music © Carrie Newcomer, Bug Music Publishing. Used with permission.)

Reunion is a key understanding of heaven – we will *be* with loved ones who have gone before us through death into new life. Our nearest and dearest are separated from us only temporarily. They're waiting to welcome us. This is great comfort for we who remain living.

But it's not the only framework for heaven our faith provides for us: In truth, our scriptures and traditions give us a variety of views and promises of heaven. How we conceive of heaven is often a clue to how we feel most broken, what we wish and pray most to escape, the ways in which we seek God's consolation for how we experience unbearable heaviness of life on earth.

One alternative to "home" is *liberation*. As the Israelites were led out of Egypt and as the workers who came at the end of the day were given full wages, in heaven we will be released from bondage. This could mean escape from literal slavery, for those caught in the sex trade that plagues our world today, or undocumented workers exploited in this country, in this town. Or, bondage and slavery as experienced in the Egypts of all of our lives – our bonds to alcohol, to relationships of violence, to credit cards – in heaven we will be set free from the false masters that overshadow our lives and we will live in freedom bound only to the one true Lord.

Forgiveness of sin and restoration to wholeness is still another image of heaven – things will be made right, all will be well. While by no means am I equating illness or bodily misfortune – no one deserves AIDS or cancer – in this framework of heaven all the harms that have happened will be healed. The breast cut off – restored; the painful and angry relationship – healed; the baby who died – cooing and plump. In heavenly restoration, the fullness of life *in community, in wholeness* will be experienced as the woman who bled was cured, and the woman who was to be stoned to death was admonished and set on a right path to sin no more – *after* the community that condemned her was put to right.

Return to safety and home; freedom from oppressions; restored to right relationship, that's heaven.

So, what is *your* hell? Where in your life, in your memories, in your heart is deep anguish, pinching pain, estrangement and decay, guilt and shame? Your deepest fear and dread of dark night?

Heaven for you is the antidote of that – if you suffer abuse; heaven is righteous relationship, the integrity of your body a temple and belovedness bestowed, fitting for a treasured child of God;

If you are entrapped, entombed, dehumanized or scorned, heaven is freedom and liberation, movement and choice for good and towards God;

If you are lost, untethered, drifting and set apart, heaven is the prodigal's journey home to centeredness and pure, unshakable belonging.

Sit for a moment with this fact. You will die.

For you will surely die – it's a guarantee of our creaturely beings – even Lazarus and the synagogue leader's daughter whom Jesus restored to life... died, eventually. Some day; somehow; in some set of circumstances, your earthly life will come to an end.

What happens between now and the time you die? Theologian Art Buchwald wrote of a recurring dream he had while in hospice care: "I am at Dulles Airport. I have a reservation to go to heaven. I go into the terminal and look at the list of flights. Heaven is at the last gate. I don't know if they have reading material on the plane, so I stop at the magazine stand and pick up (a couple). I also buy a package of gum and some M&Ms. Then I head toward security... I stand in line for hours. I didn't realize how many people were on the same flight. I run into several friends, and I am surprised to see them. They hadn't mentioned they were going too. ... The loudspeaker says, 'Heaven is at the last gate. There will be intermediate stops in Dallas, Chicago, and Albuquerque. The plane has just arrived.' I finally get to the departure gate. Dulles is crowded... Its open seating on the plane. I know heaven is a wonderful place, but on the way you have to sit three across.... I go up to the desk and ask, 'Am I entitled to frequent flyer miles?' The agent says, 'You won't need any, because you're not coming back.'" Buchwald reminds us, "...this is *my* dream.... *This* is the part I love: The loudspeaker says, 'Because of inclement weather, today's flight to heaven has been canceled. You can come back tomorrow and we'll put you on standby.'ⁱⁱ

What happens between now and the time you die? In what sense are you on standby?

On the way to heaven, you have to sit three across – on the way to heaven we have to *live close together*. I suggest to you Sisters and Brothers that living close together is what it's all about. All our living now, all the heaven that is to come is pointing to the real deal – to the end time when creation is restored... We seek heaven, yes, but that's not the final, final thing!

The vision Christian scripture provides us of the end time is this: We ARE all gathered together. At the end of time when Christ comes again in glory, we will be all gathered

together... *from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages* (Rev 7:9) sorta like Harvard Square on World Food and Music Festival – a giant, smelly, cacophonous, jostling crowd with dazzling diversity, open to all.

Our individual deaths are a relatively minor event. The significance of Jesus' going before us through the cross of death into life on the third day points forward to a general resurrection of the dead when his body – the congregation of the faithful, the church, the body of Christ on earth – will rise on the last day. ... *the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.'*"

The resurrection *of the community* is our primary Christian hope.ⁱⁱⁱ

Out of the clouds, out of the many rooms and into the streets, together, a global block party! That's the promise and the hope and the surprise of our faith: we're in it together; Christ leads us into the streets of the New Jerusalem, and we are joined in the great festival of new creation. We are promised this truth. Amen.

ⁱ I read this wisecrack someplace years ago, heaven only knows where.

ⁱⁱ Art Buchwald, *Too Soon to Say Goodbye: I don't know where I'm going. I don't even know why I'm here!* (Random House: New York, 2006), 3-5 passim.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kevin J. Madigan and Jon D. Levenson, *Resurrection: The Power of God for Christians and Jews*, (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2008), 34-35, italics added.

John 14: 1-3

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.

John 14: 11-19

Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.

Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

“I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live.

John 14: 25-27

“I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.