**St. Aidan’s Episcopal Church**

**Fourth Sunday of Easter**

**Acts11: 1-18**

**Psalm 148**

**Revelation 21:1-6**

**John 13:31-35**

**A New Earth**

Heaven is beyond our knowing. Existing, as if forever. Eternal. Unchanging, yet, beyond our understanding.

Earth is, well…., earthy. You are born, you live and you die. Nations are born, exist and disappear. Death and life. Life and death. All are connected, and thus always changing. And yet, this we understand.

This magnificent piece of scripture from Revelation is often chosen for funerals because people recognize iin it some relief from their fear of death, but I often wonder if people reading it truly realize it’s profound application to life. The problem has to do with our perceptions of how life can or should be and what heaven does or doesn’t look like, or if we think it exists at all.

We like to think we have a picture of heaven and like to ponder about our selves living in whatever our picture of heaven looks like. For instance, I’m rather hoping for fields filled with wildflowers and trees and running brooks, with an assorted array of animals, and a need for a good trowel here and there. But, I have no idea if this will be waiting for me, or streets paved with gold, which would cause me unfathomable boredom and disappointment.

But these thoughts are of the earth, and John’s thoughts are of a different kind of heaven. Simply put, one might say heaven is where God is and leave it at that. Would that it could be so simple.

Yes, heaven is where God is, but in order for us to recognize heaven when we see it, we must be united fully and completely to God. Heaven is a place where whatever it is that separates us humans, one from another, one nation from another, heaven does not exist. Separation from each other means separations from God. If separation exists, then heaven doesn’t.

Which is why, we can be confident that heaven truly does exist, and it is heaven because God is there and God’s people are united with each other and God. All this being true, we ask, why is heaven on earth so hard to achieve?

God only knows. But God does know that the old earth that we have come to work our way through, with all chances and changes in life, ceases to be. And the old heaven…the one made of old belief systems which depended on degree of wealth, or good works, or trust in one’s own imagination, has disappeared. In its place, the new heaven, wherein the stormy seas of life that have their way of separating people one from another, are no more.

It is within the new heaven and the new earth that God is to be found and it is there that humankind and God come together in glorious harmony. Surely that is worth constant and fervent prayer for the new heaven and new eath to materialize. Surely that is the kind of earth we long to live in and surely that is the kind of heaven we seek, no matter what the scenery in either really looks like.

John’s vision is an. Easter story. It is filled with the opportunity for our own resurrection in our own time and in our own context of earthly life. It is not enough for us to be satisfied with a beautiful ocean sunset now and then, or the sight of clouds of birds passing over us, as they journey toward safe haven.

It is ours to envision the meaning of those moments of loveliness and to realize that they are mere reminders that, no matter how messed up our lives are, or what devastating circumstances have arrived in our lives, or how sad we are at our helplessness in the face of cruel war and terrorism, we can stand.

We can stand and we can move forward with strength and confidence toward what we know to be the new heaven…the new Jerusalem.

It is with faith in God’s call to us as God’s beloved, that we continue on, with our vision of the new heaven and the new earth unmovable in our hearts, souls and minds. And it is with faith that we keep on walking until we come to that place in heaven and on earth where God is, where God walks not beyond our reach, but beside us, every step of the way.

On this earth we mourn for so much. We mourn the ones we have loved and lost. We mourn the loss of connection to each other within families, communities and between nations and cultures. So today, we are called to not only hear John’s words but to understand how to absorb and embrace them. The words assure every single one of us, regardless of our joys or our losses, that there is a place where crying and pain will be no more. Not for you or for me, not for anyone in this world, ever again, no matter our earthly circumstances.

Knowing this, our prayers for all those oppressed by war and oppression become more profound, as we direct our prayers appropriately. We pray they will become aware of the presence of God, their vision of a new heaven and new earth ever before them. In a world where all seems lost and death is all around, it is to this heavenly release that the human soul clings.

Twenty three years ago, my daughter lay dying at OHSU from a rare disease called aplastic anemia. It is a cruel disease which causes the blood to cease reproducing itself. Simply put, healthy blood cells reproduce themselves in the red bone marrow of large bones at about 2 million cells per second. The entire blood system in a human being is reproduced in about seven days. In the case of aplastic anemia, the ability for the body to produce blood cells stops. Without a bone marrow transplant, the patient will die. After searching throughout our family and friends for possible bone marrow matches, my daughter was placed on the waiting list for matching marrow donor. And world wide prayer began.

Amber came very close to death on Christmas Eve. Prayer poured out and was poured in. I knew Amber was a fighter who came from fighting stock and I sensed her fighting with all her strength throughout each moment on the edge of death. It was as if she knew she had to fight if she was to survive. She was 27 years old.

A donor, whose blood cells closely matched Amber’s in 5 of the six required parameters was found in Michigan and the cells were flown to Portland and subsequently injected into my daughter. A collective breath was held as we waited to see if her body would accept or reject the foreign cells. I am happy to tell you that Amber is now fifty years old, alive and well with a successful teaching career and loving family, including her adopted son, Diego.

Through such an experience, and you will have your own, the meaning of a new heaven and a new earth is made clear. Nothing earthly is relevant in the face of such potential loss. Only elements that are in their purest state are relevant to one’s survival and existence. Only by entering into a new heaven and a new earth can one realize that the only relevance within each is pure, unconditional love. There are no bargains to be made, no outcomes to promise. Only prayer formed out of deep love can raise up the will to survive and to continue living and loving in a new way.

The one seated on the throne said, See, I am making all things new.” And, “the words are trustworthy and true.” The vision of the living God, through the life of the Risen Lord, are provided for us today with a riveting illumination of the living God dwelling among us through the power of the Holy Spirit. It is a vision of reality that is worth fighting for.

There is nothing trivial about any of it. None of it is to be taken lightly. How can anyone take the vision of the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, alight with the glory of God, as simply the product of an earthly mind. Perhaps if we begin to read less on the surface and rather more through John’s words, we may begin to glimpse the magnificent and sacred mystery within whose boundaries we live and move and have our being.

We are called to walk by heavenly faith, and not by earthly sight and this means that we live within the boundaries of the beginning of all things and the continuation of all things wherein it is we find God. We live in the midst of the Alpha and the Omega. We began in the hands of the Creator and God saw that it was good, and we therefore must know, that what awaits us at the conclusion of this earthly life, must also be deemed as good and very good by our Creator.

We live our earthly life in the midst of the holy continuum, filled with disaster, natural and humanly caused, with countless miniature replications of war between ourselves. Soured relationships, hurts and disappointments, injustice and revenge, senseless decisions born of knee jerk response to imagined slights. Even our noblest intentions run awry, ending in discouragement or even failure. Our earthly pilgrimage walks us relentlessly through pain and sadness, through dark days and suffering, without opportunity to avoid any. And after each episode, whether personally experienced or felt at a national level, we know, even as we are told, that life will never be the same again. Something will be changed. Lie is always irrevocably changed for better or for worse.

Perhaps the time has come for us to glean from every story, every circumstance, every challenge in the world and all that which helps us understand the possibility of a new heaven and a new earth. Perhaps the time has come for us to live into and embrace completely, not only with our lips but with our lives, an Easter world which holds within it the light and promise of a new heaven within a new earth.

Perhaps if we allow ourselves the freedom to inhabit this bold new earth, we will find for ourselves glimpses of the new Jerusalem and of the Alpha and Omega, who is working to bring both into being in our own time.

The Great Creator of heaven and earth, who created all that is good in the beginning, is the same Great Creator of the new heaven an the new earth and all that is good in the now and in the future. But it did notk and does not come without pain or suffering.

Little children, say’s Jesus, with life comes pain. But the pain of life is not ours alone, but is shared by the One who continues to stand side by side with us, in the midst of a suffering creation. It is when God speaks to us, out from the depths of our pain, and we recognize that presence, that evil is trampled, hope is renewed and all things are made new, again and again.

It is all born out of the new commandment….the new order of things as required by Jesus, simply said, “that you love one another.”

It doesn’t matter how much you understand the bible, the creed, how many times you say the Lord’s Prayer, or how many times you read the psalms. All these are enlightening sources, but these are but mere earthly background inspiration for the real heavenly deal. Jesus’s commandment is not about what you believe, but how you live. It has far less to do with degree of orthodoxy as it has to do with love of God and each other. Jesus did not say you will be my disciples if you believe in what you deem to be the right things!

It is when we allow the love of Christ enter in so deeply, so profoundly that we begin to recognize the new heaven. And, it is when the presence of each shines through all that we are, all that we say, and all that we do for and to one another that the new earth begins to stir itself into life.

It is a phenomenon that the old earth longs for, and dreams about, but cannot ever attain through earthly argument or need to win. A new earth only be accomplished through faith in the unalterable glory of God’s new heaven, breathed through the life of a Christ-centered community by the power of the Holy Spirit, and through deep and abiding love.

Amen.

Written to the Glory of God

E. J. R. Culver+

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