



ST. ANDREW'S IN THE PINES EPISCOPAL CHURCH

SERMON
5-5-13

To the best of my knowledge none of us have gone to heaven and returned to tell the rest of us about it. Although, like me, perhaps you have heard those stories or read about near-death/death experiences in books. I like hearing those stories because I find them reassuring – and even though each one varies in their details, each also captures a bit of what the writer of Revelation has been sharing in the readings from the last two Sundays and today. We hear about that wonderful, sacred place where there are no more tears and all are worshipping and praising God. And there is no temple in this place for I guess all will know and worship the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb in unity. And there is no darkness or anything unclean to be found.

It is all so wonderfully glorious. To be in that place, to be in a place like that – well – that is part of our Christian hope. Someday – all will be well and I and you will be in heaven. This is part of our Christian hope.

Yet there is another side to our Christian hope – another element to this living this life of faith. Consider again these lines – “Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there anymore.” What a rich, lush vision – reminiscent a bit of the Garden of Eden – where God created all that is and declared it – GOOD.

John and I just returned from our annual two day spring trip into Yellowstone Park and behold – it was Good! Who can help but glory in the created wonder of that place? “The river of the water of life” – we view those incredible geysers, marvel at the colors and delicate sculpting in the thermal pools, watch the life in and surrounding the rivers, watch the land greening from the melting snowfall – and know that water is sacred – the water of life. Perhaps some of you have even read about the current research into the microorganisms and bacteria found in some of Yellowstone’s thermal waters. Scientists are ecstatic about finding some of the earliest life forms that may unlock more understanding to all living things. Flowing through our land is the river of the water of life.

And on either side of the river is the tree of life and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations! Wow – isn’t that a wonderful hope – leaves of the tree for the healing of the nations. Now this may be stretching it a bit – but during our days in the park – we were surrounded by

people from lots of nations. One night in a restaurant we couldn't even hear any English being spoken. Surrounded in the beauty and inspiration of the wilderness – we are people in awe, even in love with the same things. And we share side by side, peacefully.

You see, here is the other side of our Christian hope – the creation of heaven on earth. Consider that in the beginning God created all that is – the plants, people, animals – all things and declared them ALL to be good. There is an equality of value in all created by our God. The care and love we give ourselves is to be given in equal measure to the rest of creation. It is a return to the Garden of Eden.

Consider this – that in Jesus' death and resurrection, God came into humanity to start the world on the course toward complete healing. In the book of John, once Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit that is coming into each of us to teach, counsel, and guide us – Jesus says that we will do even greater things than he – even greater things than He.

Consider the words of Paul when he declares that God is making all things new. If God is working in us and through us and making all things new – What direction would God's work be going in this world? Would it be decreasing or increasing in glory? Is God's work going to be smaller or bigger than our imagination? Is God's work going to be always for good? If we get serious thinking about God and our faith foundation – wouldn't we have to say to ourselves – “Whatever is coming, whatever my life might be about – there may be way more going on here than I realize or imagine? And as I live and breathe on this earth – aren't I part of the work of God?

And consider this line we pray every single Sunday – it is from the Lord's prayer. ...”your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” On earth as it is in heaven – your kingdom come- your will be done. Now who is it that would be doing that will? What we have been reading and hearing described in Revelation could be a description of the life created here on earth. Heaven is and can be right here, right now- or glimpses of it now- just like the glimpses we have of our future. Our work in creation and with creation is the creation of God's kingdom – God's healing, caring, beautiful, rich, peaceful, glorious world.

That also is our Christian hope. Last week was Earth Day. This Sunday is Rogation Sunday – an early tradition in the church when priests and parishioners asked God to help the earth to produce good crops in this season of planting and rebirth. At the start of Genesis we are told to be good stewards – stewards of our own body, of each other, and of the land and all that grows and lives upon it.

That was another thing that I appreciated this year during our visit to the Park. I noticed and appreciated the actual dedication shown not just to giving refuge to so many animals, but also care of the environment through recycling, multi-use soap and shower and lotion dispensers, through the food being served coming from local renewable sources, from low energy light bulbs, and attempts at protecting the land from overuse by the visitors.

Those efforts were both hopeful and inspiring to me. Just as I find the words in Revelation hopeful and inspiring, so also do I find a vision of each of us working to create heaven on earth

hopeful and inspiring. There are possibilities of heaven to come in so many ways through so many means – with each of us a part of it. How hopeful.

Thanks be to God.