

Sermon Notes – March 18, 2018
“Thoughts on Heaven”
Brian Walton

For the past few weeks we have been on a journey of reflection, a journey of translation. We have examined our Christian legacy and wondered how to make sense of its message in an age of neutrons and quarks; of web browsing and gigabytes. The tradition passed to us told us we were sinners, estranged from God, in need of being saved. Tradition told us that Jesus died to provide a strange kind of compensation through the shedding of his blood and that his death opened to us the possibility of eternal life in heaven.

I have wrestled with this tradition and have invited you into this wrestling through our examination of “churchy words.” I’ve confessed that my modern mind does not believe that human mistakes result in God’s judgement. I do not believe that God required Jesus blood to be shed in order to forgive us. Over these last few weeks I’ve attempted to translate old churchy words so they make sense to us. I suggested that sin is that part of me which gets caught up in relentless self-interest at the expense of others. I suggested that salvation comes when the life of Jesus (and other love-infused people) inspire me to love without restraint, rescue me from self-interest and liberate me to do “the good.” Today we come to the churchy word, “heaven.” In the historic understanding of Christianity heaven is the reward for those who follow Jesus.

To my surprise, I discovered that when the word ‘heaven’ is used in scripture it more often describes geography than theology. In the three-tiered view of the ancients, the world was flat and sat upon a foundation that was dark, earthy and cave-like. The word translated as hell came from

the Hebrew, Sheol, and the Greek, Hades. It was the dark region, the underworld. As one moved geographically from Sheol to earth, one discovered fresh plants and clean water. Then, if we looked to the third tier we came to heaven. A place where the sun resides, where blue sky is pervasive, where canopies hold up water which sometimes leaks out as rain. In this beautiful, physically-untouchable realm, God resides. And so, in many places of scripture, heaven is simply the beauty of all that lies above us, not some kind of residence for the departed. In today's Psalm the writer declares, "How majestic is your name in all of the earth, for you have set your glory above the heavens!"

Although our scriptures seldom suggest it, Christian tradition came to believe that heaven is where we go when we die. The heavenly sphere is the locale of angels and of eternal life. Whether we believe in heaven or dismiss it, the idea that heaven is a place for the departed is imbedded in Christian tradition. So true was this for me in childhood, that I clung to this belief when my father died prematurely. My Christian enthusiasm and my childhood naivety once led me to ask my grieving mother, "Why do you cry so much if Dad is with God and the angels?" That she allowed such an impertinent question in the face of her terrible grief is surely testimony of her love for me. Whatever heaven is, it cannot placate the anguish that comes with the loss of a loved one.

I took this belief about heaven into my early days in seminary and was shocked when one of my fellow students challenged me. "You don't really believe that stuff," he said. "Surely you don't think Jesus actually rose from the dead." I was stunned that in this place of God-study there were such challenges. Yet, over the next three years my belief in heaven was dismantled – not destroyed – but seriously questioned. Those lingering

questions stayed with me until, a decade later, I stood looking at the ancient aqueducts and baths built by the Romans in the now British town of Bath. I thought about those ancient workers. I thought about the countless pilgrims who had travelled to bathe in those waters. I thought about the centuries of tourists who had marveled at the amazing engineering. I thought about them all - how generations upon generations of people were now dead, and I concluded: Resurrection must be significantly different than my childhood mind had imagined.

Heaven and resurrection gradually slipped lower on my belief scale. It seemed so impossible. Modern philosophers and pragmatists scoffed at the idea. The scientific method not able to validate the afterlife dismissed the possibility. Yet not all scientists come to this conclusion. In a recent MacLean's article, the reporter highlights numerous accounts of Near Death Experiences. Central to the article is a book authored by Eben Alexander entitled, *Proof of Heaven*. Alexander is a Harvard-trained neurosurgeon who had no belief in an afterlife until his own brain functioning was attacked by virulent bacteria. Living on the edge of death he encountered a God-power which he describes as "omniscient, omnipotent, and unconditionally loving." He writes that his scientifically-informed disbelief in an after-life now "lies broken at (my) feet"

The article chronicles many Near Death Experiences, describing out-of-body experiences and encounters with a loving presence. Perhaps you have heard such testimonies. My best man's father and my neighbour at the lake have told me of their own out-of-body experiences. The reporter notes the scientific debate between those who argue that such visions are related to oxygen deficiency or a sudden experience of REM sleep and others who negate their hypotheses.

In the final analysis science doesn't help me. I return to the scriptures and to this morning's letter of St. Paul. "Some will ask, how are the dead raised ... The seed you sow does not come to life unless it dies. So it is with the resurrection ... it is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body." Just what is a spiritual body? Is it the return of corpse and consciousness to the energy of the universe to continue the life cycle of earth to plants to animals to humans to earth again? Is a spiritual body that which remains as memory in our friends and loved ones who recall our tics and insights, our teachings and failings, our actions and our love? Is a spiritual body an intact presence and unique entity that exists in another dimension of time and space, yet to be discovered?

I was taught an important lesson by my friend and former parishioner Blaine Holmlund. Some of you will remember Blaine – a former professor of engineering, a past vice-president of the University, a compassionate sceptic, someone engaged just enough of the Christian story to return to church but remained doubtful enough to always have questions. We had many chats. At my farewell in 2004 he toasted me, in part, because of a sermon in which I suggested God might more likely be a verb (an act of love, courage or compassion) than a noun (a super human-like entity in charge of the universe). Blaine wanted honest conversations and I attempted to engage him. A year after I left St. Martin's Blaine was dying of cancer. A few days before his death he asked to see me. He did not have much energy, but we chatted for a few minutes. Then he asked me, "What happens after I die?" I did not expect this question from him. I sat in stunned silence knowing that our intellectual respect for one another did not permit me to be anything but honest. I stumbled out my best answer, "Blaine, I don't know." And then, as if the God-power itself blew upon my

consciousness, I came to a realization. Heaven is not what I know with certainty; heaven is what I hope for. My relationship with the God-power has always inspired hope in me – hope for a better world; hope that love will prevail. I turned back to Blaine and I repeated, “I do not know, but I hope. I hope you are united with God. I hope you have a consciousness and a sense of completion. I even dare to hope, that you might encounter the spirit of your loved ones who have gone before.”

I still cling to this revelation. For me heaven is not about a reward; nor is it a matter of proof or disproof. I don't know, so I hope. I hope in heaven, and I trust in the God-power, come what may. Amen.