

First Presbyterian Church  
Cheyenne, Wyoming  
November 1, 2009  
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: The Hope of Heaven,  
Isaiah 25: 6-9, John 11: 17-27, 32-44, Revelation 21: 1-6

“Everybody wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to die.” This is an old cliché that contains a great deal of insight as to how we think and feel about death, and our hope of going to heaven. We know all too well that death is a part of our lives on earth. It is unavoidable. The Bible says death is the result of our original sin where the first man and first woman disobeyed God, and tried to become gods themselves. Unfortunately, we have continued to practice this foolishness over the eons, and as a result, death continues to be a part of our lives.

Sometimes death can be merciful when nothing else can be done to help a person continue to live a life of any quality. The decision to let a loved one go is a very tough one to make. Sometimes the moment of death can bring a great peace to the dying person and to those who stand by their side. Even then, accepting death is not easy. Other times, death can be tragic and fill us with an indescribable sense of shock and loss. The death of another person can hit us so hard that we can hardly breathe. Thankfully our Lord Jesus Christ knows how to give us CPR when the breath of life has been nearly sucked out of us by a loved one's death. As a pastor and a father, I have experienced all of these aspects in the death of church or family members. I can understand why we fear the spiritual, psychological and even physical pain that comes with death. When I look over the names of the people on the memorials list today, I know that both the painful surprise and the mercy of death were involved. I know that there are families still trying to catch their breath, and at the same time may be relieved that the suffering of the loved one is over. I miss each of these people for the place they had in my life and the life of the church. Sometimes death can be a mercy and sometimes it is a tragic shock, but it is never easy.

All these tough aspects of death were also true for people of the Bible passages read today. We are not sure of the exact date when Isaiah 25 was written, but the people of Israel and Judah some 600-700 years before the birth of Jesus had experienced many wars, even exile, and thousands of deaths of their people. In John 11, we heard how deeply grieved Martha and Mary were over the death of their brother Lazarus. “Martha said to Jesus, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.’” This is something we might say today upon the loss of a loved one. Even Jesus, the one who is God with us was emotionally upset and wept when he saw Lazarus' sister, Mary and many of Lazarus' friends weeping at his grave. Lazarus was a dear friend of Jesus. The early Christians, to whom the Revelation was written in about 90 A.D. experienced persecutions and death for their faith in Jesus Christ. So those people of the Bible days also understood the tough aspects of death.

Ah, but as we also heard read in the Bible passages, death did not have the last word for the people of God then, nor does it today. The people of God are people of hope—hope of heaven, not just in the afterlife, but in this life, too. We are also these

people. The church members we will recognize today in the memorials litany were such people. Along with the people of Isaiah, we can declare, that God “will destroy the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces...for the Lord has spoken.” When God speaks, great things happen. Death did not have the last word for the people of God in Biblical days, nor does it today. The God of life in whom our hope of heaven lies has the last word.

We see God’s spoken last word, his power over death, and the hope of heaven he gives us come alive in Jesus through the story in John 11. “We see it in the expressions of Jesus’ humanity, his identification with the grief of Martha and Mary, his anger at the weeping and wailing of the mourners who doubted his ability to raise up Lazarus. We see it in his indignation at the yet unbridled power of death. He is deeply disturbed at death’s devastating force.” But because he was God with us, Jesus was able to overcome all this grief, anger, and the seemingly unstoppable power of death.

Texts for Preaching: Year B, pg. 612.

All this is possible because “Jesus is the bringer of resurrection and life. Jesus the Son is empowered by God the Father to do this. “When Jesus comes with Martha to the tomb, we have been prepared ahead of time for what will happen, and yet the scene is still dramatic and startling. Like Martha, we have no capacity to imagine what takes place, no prior experience with which to identify the event—Jesus’ prayer, the loud voice”—the spoken Word of God, “and the emergence of the dead man still wrapped in the burial cloths. It is such a shock, something utterly new and strange. Resurrection is like that, always like that—an unexplained, unparalleled happening. It is the emergence of the smelly, decaying corpse, coming, at the voice of Jesus, to life. And then the spoken words, ‘Unbind him, and let him go.’ Loosed from the bonds of death, freed from the shackles of the past, let go into a new future—resurrection is a liberation. The raising of Lazarus foreshadows Jesus’ own resurrection at the hands of God. As extraordinary as the raising of Lazarus is, we miss the point of the miracle if we miss the ultimate reality to which it points, namely, the revelation of a death-destroying, life-giving God” working through Jesus who is the bringer of resurrection and life. He gives us the hope of heaven. Texts for Preaching: Year B, pg. 612.

What does this heaven we hope for look and feel like? Our fellow members whom we will remember in the memorial litany today and so many of our loved ones may already know. The passage from Revelation indeed reveals a great deal about this heaven. It is the re-creation of heaven and earth. What has been destroyed by sin and death is restored, made new. Heaven is living in the presence of God and Jesus. There is no more death, mourning, crying and pain. The passage from Isaiah speaks of heaven as a great banquet where all the peoples of the world are gathered in peace to feast with God. Such a feast of heaven is what we celebrate together in the sharing of the Lord’s Supper in the presence of Jesus Christ here on earth. Heaven is also like the resurrection of Lazarus. After we die, Jesus will cry out our name, and command us to “come out” just as he did Lazarus. God will recreate us into spiritual bodies better than our earthly ones for we will be new creations that will never suffer again. We will be reunited with our loved ones just like Lazarus was on earth with Mary, Martha and his friends.

The most graphic description of heaven outside the Bible I have ever heard or read is found in the book, 90 Minutes in Heaven written by Baptist pastor, Don Piper. He was in a terrible car accident and was pronounced dead. He writes that when he died a brilliant light beyond description enveloped him and in his next moment of awareness he was in heaven. He was filled with great joy and experienced a large crowd of people who had been standing in front of an ornate gate rushing toward him. They were smiling and praising God. They hugged him and kissed him. In the book, Rev. Piper tells of the people he met in heaven, family and friends who had gone on before him. "Everything felt blissful and perfect." "Heaven was like a first class buffet for the senses." He felt loved like he had never been loved before. He was ushered into stages of brilliant light until he was finally standing in the awesome presence of God, even though he could not see any features of God. He heard magnificent music of praise to God that was beyond anything he had heard on earth. The beauty of what surrounded him was like the new creation of which Revelation speaks. He says that his words are too feeble to adequately describe all he heard, saw and felt in heaven. Much to his disappointment, he was abruptly returned to earth to face this life again. Don's experience of heaven was very Biblical, and so much like that of what we may hope and dream it may be. Pages 21-37.

How shall we respond to what we have heard about the hope of heaven? How can we experience this for ourselves and help others know it? I recommend Martha's response to Jesus in John 11. Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." This confession of faith is an "assent to the truth of Jesus' relationship with God," they are one, "and the decisive change that relationship means for the lives of those of us who believe... this confession of "faith creates communion with Jesus. Through Jesus, we as believers receive the gift of life," the everlasting life that begins here on earth. Let us visualize Jesus looking into our eyes as he looked into Martha's and hear his voice asking us, "Do you believe this?" We must respond as Martha did to fully know the hope of heaven and be able to share it so others can know it, too. TNIBC Vol. IX pg 694.

Jesus Christ, God's last word on life and death has given us the hope of heaven in this life and the life to come. He has gifted us with a faith in him that frees us from sin and death. He invites us to be in communion with him and one another at his table. May the God of the hope heaven, "who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, make us complete in everything good, so that we may do God's will, working among us that which is pleasing in God's sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever." Amen. Hebrews 13: 20, 21

