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Alexandria, VA 22310
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John 13:31–35
Rev.21:16

WHAT MAKES HEAVEN, HEAVEN?

We're near the end of the Book of Revelation, so you don't have to worry about too many more sermons from this apocalyptic book. This is, in fact, John's final vision here in Chapter 21. It continues through the end of the book; but here in these verses, John sees what distinguishes the new heaven and new earth from the heaven and earth that we perceive now.

Did you hear the words, "And the sea was no more ...," right after the beginning of the vision? In our modern sensibilities, we don't quite grasp the understanding. But go back to the very first book of *The Bible*, Genesis, and remember how God contained the sea and the chaos which they believed abided under the waters—the evil that infected their world. These early believers were sure that evil came from the chaos they saw out in the ocean. The sea symbolizes the origins of evil—sea monsters, evil spirits, all that sort of thinking. It's beyond our modern minds to even grasp.

But our spiritual ancestors would not have said, "The devil made me do it." They would be more likely to say, "The evil of the chaotic waters has infected me." So, in the vision of John, evil is no longer possible. That is a new earth and a new heaven, isn't it? Imagine in this new creation which God is bringing into a reality, evil is gone forever and nothing exists that can separate us from God.

After the sea has been vanquished, as written in Revelation, John, the revelator, says, "Look, because God is now at home among mortals." I have to admit I like the original translation better. They go, "God is "tabernacling" with his people, and God tabernacles among us." That sounds more like what we think should be happening. And then, as if to make sure that we don't miss what John is saying, he changes people into the word *peoples*. Clearly he wants to indicate that God has worked through Israel; but always God's intent was that Israel would be a blessing for the whole world, so that all the people, not just one tribe, would be included in this new heaven and new earth.

With all this demonstration of power, there's also the imminent tenderness of a god who stoops down and wipes away tears from their eyes. All the first things are gone. All that has limited our ability to care for and love one another the way Jesus has loved us exists no longer.

Before we go any further, I wonder if you've heard the joke about the minister who preached on Revelation two Sundays in a row in a Presbyterian church? It seems that some of the parishioners began to write the preacher notes on their "ritual of friendship" pads. In this section for notes or prayer requests one person writes, "Thanks Pastor. We get it; we know you went to seminary, but, so what?"

What is it about Revelations that scares us away—that causes us to miss that blessing promised early on if only we will read it? We live in a world that is thirsty for justice and goodness—for truth and peace. We live in this world, and often our best intention—our highest dreams—are thwarted by evil around us and within us, and so heaven only becomes heaven when people are participating in something radically different than what this world offers as truth or as justice.

We have to participate in the new Jerusalem God is creating. Our old way of thinking has to take a back seat to the new way of thinking God places within us. There's actually a book called, *The Devil's Dictionary*, by Ambrose Beirce. Beirce says "heaven is defined as a noun where the wicked cease from troubling you with talk of their personal affairs and the good listen while you expound on your own." That does sound like how the Devil would like us to understand heaven. Let's make it all about us, right? You've been to those family gatherings where you see people on an infrequent basis, and somewhere along in the afternoon or the evening, you have to stop yourself from saying, "Oh, yes, I forgot; it's all about you."

That's how we make heaven. It's all about us. The church has been accused and sometimes justifiably so of taking the Gospel message and making it all about us, but it doesn't have to be that way.

There's an Intervarsity Press publication, *Culture Making*, by Andy Crouch, which tells about some church leaders in Denver who decide to go into their neighborhood in pairs. They go into the neighborhood and begin at a crowded park near their church. They ask people a simple question; this required that they take the time to listen before providing answers. They start by wanting to hear their neighbors. And here's what they asked: "How could a church in your neighborhood best serve you regardless of whether you ever wanted to visit it or not?" The second part of that question is the really important part, isn't it?

At first people were shocked, kind of taken back. They reeled on their heels a bit in surprise and then they answered in predictable ways—things that you would think of right away: community child care would be nice; a block party. That would be fun. Maybe if the church opened its doors to community meetings. And then they received the response that was most shocking of all. Admittedly it was cynical in nature, but one man said, "Well, they could leave the neighborhood." Now while they were still reeling from this response, they slowly began to take it to heart. How can we become the church that nobody wants to leave the neighborhood? How can we become the church that everyone would miss if we left this neighborhood?

I think this illustration from this book is appropriate for Bush Hill and for us, because we were always meant to reshape the culture around us, not because of what we did, but because of how we went about everything that we attempt, always remembering that we are ushers for the presence of God in other peoples' lives as well as our own. We are agents of God's intention of human interconnectedness. That's when you recognize what heaven really is about; not just some place we go when we die, but a place that God is creating now. In just a few moments, you will say the words, "Many will come from east and west and north and south ..." to share a meal—a meal in a parking lot, a

meal where we actively engage one another not so someone will become a member, but so that we might understand that God is making holy our connections even with our neighbors. And heaven is where eternity begins in our neighborhoods.

Do we understand what God is doing in our midst and what God wants to see us become? *A neighborhood where Christ's love is shared as extravagantly as it was given.* This is the time of invitation for your now. This offering is a chance where you can say Lord, help me become part of just such a church that John described and Jesus defined. Let that happen in your life as you offer God everything that you are.

Amen.