



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

MARCH 2, 2014
Transfiguration Sunday

Heaven on Earth
Exodus 24:12-18; Matthew 17:1-9, 14-21

An elderly couple, having been married almost 60 years, died in a car crash. They had been in good health the last ten years mainly due to her interest in healthy food and exercise.

When they reached the pearly gates, St. Peter took them to their mansion which was decked out with a beautiful kitchen, a master bath suite, and a Jacuzzi.

As they "oohed and aahed" the old man asked Peter how much all this was going to cost.

"It's free," Peter replied, "this is Heaven."

Next they went out back to survey the championship golf course that the home backed up to. They would have golfing privileges everyday and each week the course changed to a new one representing the great golf courses on earth.

The old man asked, "What are the green fees?"

Peter's reply, "This is heaven, you play for free."

They went into the club house and saw the lavish buffet lunch with cuisine from all over the world laid out.

"How much to eat?" asked the old man.

"Don't you understand yet? This is heaven, it is free!" Peter replied with some exasperation.

"Well, where are the low fat and low cholesterol tables?" the old man asked timidly.

Peter lectured, "That's the best part . . .you can eat as much as you like of whatever you like and you never get fat and you never get sick. This is Heaven."

With that the old man went into a fit of anger, throwing down his hat, stomping on it, and shrieking wildly.

Peter and the man's wife both tried to calm him down, asking him what was wrong. The old man looked at his wife and said, "This is all your fault. If it weren't for your blasted bran muffins, I could have been here ten years ago!"

Indeed, if heaven were really an incarnation of our favorite resort, we might all like to check in a little early! We don't quite know what heaven is or where it is, do we? Biblical writers suggest that it is a place of blessing and peace where no differences divide us and no needs go unmet. It is a place where joy is abundant and adoration of God flows naturally. Where heaven is we cannot pinpoint. We certainly know that it is not on earth. We know that it is a spiritual realm, but we tend to think of it as being "up there," wherever "there" might be.

Wherever heaven is, God seems to enjoy spending time here on earth. It is as if earth is some kind of "cosmic Caribbean," the ideal vacation spot when God wants to get away from whatever it is that God does in heaven. We know that early on in earth's story, God treated earth as the perfect getaway. Genesis tells us that God enjoyed walking in his garden paradise in the cool of the day. It was shirt-sleeve weather and there were plenty of citrus drinks to go around so God relaxed at the close of each day with his new companions, Adam and Eve.

It promised to be the ideal place to unwind, but it was not. Things went awry and God had to shut down the garden resort and send Eve and Adam packing. Yet, even after the beautiful garden was gone, God continued to come here to earth. Sometimes those visits were quite good like his sojourn with Abram and Sarai when God told them they would have their child of promise or the visit on the mountaintop when God wrapped Jesus in holy light and allowed Moses and Elijah to drop by. No wonder Peter wanted to build a little retreat center and stay forever. They could all sit around the campfire singing "Kum Ba Yah" and God would actually show up!

Most often, however, God visits earth, not for relaxation, but for work. It is like spending spring break building Habitat houses in the Dominican Republic. What a beautiful place to be—but to work, not to play! Throughout scripture we discover that God continues to show up here, in effect bringing a little heaven to earth.

Like Peter, we tend to think of heaven on earth as a mini-paradise, a refuge from the day to day grind, a place for God's children to be pampered a little and receive a little TLC. Yet, when God invited Moses to meet him on the mountain, it was not to kick back and enjoy the fresh mountain air. Instead, God gave Moses a list of ten things his people needed to do and sent him back down the mountain to make it happen. In the same way, when Peter, James, and John experienced the presence of God on the mountain with Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, it was not for their entertainment. It was preparation for their return back to work.

In our Gospel story for today, Jesus lets Peter know immediately that while it is good to commune with God and really cool to hang out with folks like Moses and Elijah, that is not our purpose on earth. There is work to do, and we must be about it right now. Heaven coming to earth is not about finding a little paradise that already exists here; rather, it is about bringing the goodness of heaven to the need of earth. Heaven on earth is about the righteousness, justice, and joy of God infusing life on earth.

Jesus' point was well made when no sooner had their feet hit flat ground than a man rushed up to Jesus and begged him to heal his son of epilepsy. It is an uncomfortable scene for instead of his usual compassionate response, Jesus appears short-tempered and frustrated. He heals the boy then chides the disciples for their limited faith. Jesus' response puzzles us for it sounds as if faith is about quantity. "Because of your little faith," Jesus said. "If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you" (Matthew 17:20-21). Yet, how can we quantify faith? And how can we know how much is enough? I think the answer lies in the fact that Jesus is not talking about quantity but quality. His term "little" is not meant to suggest a measurement; rather, Jesus is pointing his disciples toward the kind of faith they have.

In a recent Upper Room devotion, Tracey Maxey Cox offered a brilliant perspective on this passage. She wrote,

After a discussion with friends, I realized my application of this verse from Matthew 17 was different than most. The disciples could not understand why they were unable to heal a young boy. Jesus explained that their faith was weak. With true faith we can do anything, Jesus said — even move mountains.

Reading this scripture, many people envision a majestic mountain picking up her skirts of rock and trees and stepping left or right — making a path for their purpose. But in my vision, I am pushing a wheelbarrow and carrying a shovel. I'm moving my mountain one rock at a time.¹

Jesus' disciples wanted big, bold, dramatic faith that could dazzle and deliver. The challenge of curing the boy was an opportunity to demonstrate their skills and dazzle the audience. But that is not how we go about God's work. We don't dramatically move mountains, but we do carry one rock at a time. We are not called to dazzle, but we are asked to deliver ministry to one another.

I remember when the Bassett Center for Homeless Families was first proposed. The community began raising money. The School Board donated the property. The building was gutted and then slowly, carefully, board by board, nail by nail, it was rebuilt into a place where families can be safe and can be helped until they can stand on their own. It took many long months for that mountain to move, and it is still inching along, but it happened, thanks to God bringing heaven to earth and inviting us to join in the party.

Heaven on earth is a movement, a process, an involvement in what God is doing all around us. Do we not pray each week, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven"? Whatever it is like in heaven, God wants it to be like that on earth which means that we are called to take our cues from Jesus and transform life here.

In a 2012 online *TIME Ideas* article titled, "Should We Bring Heaven Down to Earth?", Jon Meacham asks, "Is heaven where we go when we die, or God's space in the here and now of this world?" He quotes Christopher Morse, professor of theology and ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York, as having said, "Heaven is a new state of affairs in which God's

¹Tracey Maxey Cox, "Moving Mountains," *The Upper Room Daily Devotional*, February 19, 2014, ©2014 by The Upper Room.

grace, God's love, God's mercy is coming into the present situation . . . It is breaking in and breaking up all that opposes love and freedom in the world."² Meacham, observed,

If heaven is understood more as God's space on earth than as an ethereal region apart from the essential reality we know, then what happens on earth matters even more than we think, for the Christian life becomes a continuation of the unfolding work of Jesus, who will one day return to set the world to rights.

If you begin to think about the drama of life in such terms, you begin to invest more meaning in the here and now — not in the "eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die" pagan way, but as a way of infusing everything with potentially sacred meaning. The love of friends, the brush of your spouse's hand, the eyes of a young child — these become not hints or glimpses of what heaven may be like as a posthumous region but of what earth may be like if light and love achieve dominion over darkness and envy.³

In other words, if we live in such a way that every act, every word, every desire is holy, a gift from God given to us, then we can truly move the mountains of envy and hatred, defeat and despair, poverty and illness, injustice and sorrow, and make God's way of life apparent on earth. Everything we do holds the potential for enabling someone else to experience heaven on earth. What a wonderful thought. What a phenomenal opportunity. What a tremendous blessing!

Where is heaven? It may be right in the pew beside you or waiting right outside the doors of this sanctuary. It might be in the restaurant where you eat lunch, the store where you shop, the place where you work, or the school where you study. Heaven may be at your doorstep or in downtown Rocky Mount. It might be on the other side of the tracks or on the other end of the phone. Wherever we are, wherever we go, whatever we do, God invites us to bring God's goodness—heaven—into the lives of the people we meet. Give 'em heaven and move those mountains!

²Jon Meacham, "Should We Bring Heaven Down to Earth?" *TIME Ideas*; available online at: <http://ideas.time.com/2012/04/05/should-we-bring-heaven-down-to-earth/>.

³Meacham.

March 2, 2014

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Almighty and Merciful God, just as you called Moses to a mountain-top encounter and revealed yourself to him, you continue to call us, to speak to us, and to send us out to share your Word. Your transforming light reveals a fresh vision and a new sense of purpose for us as your children, and so we come now to offer ourselves to you in worship and to give thanks for the many gifts we have received from your gracious hand. We thank you for work we are given to do and for the strength and skill to accomplish it. We thank you for your truth, which conveys your will and lights our path in pursuit of it. We thank you for your Spirit who moves among us, energizing us to complete the tasks of servanthood, even when our motivation is weak and our resources seem inadequate. We thank you, O Lord, that in your generosity, you continue to supply these gifts when we do not deserve them or when we fail to make good use of them.

Redeeming and Sustaining God, as a people who have been blessed so that we might be a blessing to others, we have been called to work and to pray for our brothers and sisters out of our love for one another and our common love for you. We lift up to you those who are sick and those who grieve and pray for your healing touch upon them. We pray for peace for those whose lives are disrupted by chaos and violence. We ask for your mercy for those across our city and around your world whose physical and emotional needs overwhelm them and whose hope has abandoned them. Burden our hearts with compassion and generosity for your children and move our hands and feet to respond to their needs. We make these and all our prayers in the name of the One who came to reveal the full extent of your love for us, even Jesus the Christ. Amen.

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