

Life Beyond Life
Isaiah 25:6-9, Revelation 21:1-7
October 29, 2006

In one *Dennis the Menace* comic, Dennis is paying a visit to Mr. Wilson. “Have ya got a minute, Mr. Wilson?” “Sure. You have 55 seconds left.” “I’m tryin’ to figger out what I’m gonna be when I grow up,” says Dennis. “Should I be a doctor?” as Mr. Wilson pictures himself in a hospital bed with Dennis the surgeon about to take a scalpel to him! Dennis continues, “Or a fireman? How ‘bout a policeman?” Mr. Wilson sees himself by the roadside receiving a speeding ticket from Officer Dennis. Dennis goes on, “Maybe even President. I’ll let ya know what I decide!” And off he runs. Mrs. Wilson finds Mr. Wilson sitting on the porch with a stunned look on his face. “You look like you just saw a ghost, George!” “Worse, Martha!” he answers. “I just caught a glimpse of the FUTURE!”¹ Poor Mr. Wilson! The image of a future with Dennis the Menace in leadership was horrifying!

John’s Book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible, is written to give Christians at the end of the first century a glimpse of the future. The culmination of John’s vision, a portion of which we read today, is not terrifying as was Mr. Wilson’s glimpse of Dennis’ future. John offers his readers a vision of a beautiful city and the peaceful reign of God.

John’s Revelation is written to people undergoing great persecution at the hands of the Roman Emperor Domitian. John writes to encourage the Christians to remain loyal to Christ. In spite of all the forces marshaled against them, if they remain faithful to God, they will reign victorious in the end. John urges them to keep the faith because in the end good will triumph over evil, God will be victorious over Satan.

We read this Bible passage on All Saints’ Sunday because we stand in the midst of grief. We feel the loss of family members and beloved saints of the church. Their absence stings. They leave an empty place in our hearts and lives. And what’s more, death seems like an affront to our faith. We know that God’s will is for life and wholeness. So why does disease take loved ones from us, ending their lives and fragmenting ours? Why do accidents randomly wipe innocents from the face of the earth, leaving years unlived, futures unfulfilled? Grief shakes our trust in the goodness of God.

Not only have we suffered personal losses, but our world is groaning in travail, aching and suffering from natural disasters, terrorist attacks, wars,

hatred, and violence. We live in fearful times and we wonder how it will all end.

Like those early Christians, we too wish to have a glimpse of the future. We desire to know where our loved ones have gone. As our bodies age, we wonder what will happen to us when this life ends. Is there a heaven? If so, what is it like? How will the world end – in war or in the peaceful reign of God?

Artists have a great deal of fun offering visions of heaven. A *New Yorker* cartoon showed St. Peter standing behind his desk at the Pearly Gates with an open ledger and a quill pen. He begins addressing those before him with these words: “Welcome aboard. You are now exempt from federal, state and local taxes.” That would be a welcome relief!

Peter Kreeft writes, “Hell is an unending church service without God. Heaven is God without a church service.” Imagine that, no church services in heaven!

Ludwig van Beethoven, the composer who was totally deaf later in life, said, “I shall hear in heaven.” It is comforting to think of heaven as a place where broken lives are made whole.

Research indicates that about eight out of ten Americans continue to believe in an after life of some sort. A large majority of Americans (79%) agree with the statement “every person has a soul that will live forever, either in God’s presence or absence.” 76% of Americans believe that Heaven exists, while nearly the same proportion said that there is such a thing as Hell (71%). Those who believe in Heaven were divided between describing Heaven as “a state of eternal existence in God’s presence” (46%) and those who said it is “an actual place of rest and reward where souls go after death” (30%).²

John’s vision as described in the Book of Revelation is not necessarily a description of heaven per se. It is full of images which point toward the fulfillment of time when God reigns over all life. It envisions a time beyond the separation of earth and heaven. In John’s vision the heavenly city descends to earth; heaven and earth are one. Humans and God are no longer separated in earth and heaven. God makes his home with humans and human hearts are fully open to the presence of God in their lives and relationships. God accompanies the people and they belong to God.

To the early Christians, certain images in John’s vision inspire great hope. In biblical literature the sea is symbolic of a chaotic and destructive power that works against God. The sea stands between John, the pastor, imprisoned on the island of Patmos, and his congregations in Asia. In

John's heavenly vision, the sea is no more; there is no longer a chaotic power to threaten or separate humans from God or one another. The water seen in this new realm springs from the waters of life and quenches thirsty souls. Water is life-giving, not destructive.

The image of a new Jerusalem, dressed as a bride, is comforting to the early Christians. Jerusalem has been the holy city for Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Jerusalem is the site of Mt. Moriah, the rock on which it is believed that Abraham offered his son Isaac in sacrifice to God. Jerusalem was the site chosen by David for Israel's temple, built by David's son, Solomon. Jerusalem was the place to which Jews and Christians made pilgrimages for holy days. Then in 70 A.D. Jerusalem and the holy Temple were destroyed by the Romans, who were destroying the lives of Christians at the time of John's writing. The hope of a New Jerusalem, beautiful as a bride, paved with streets of gold was an inspiring vision to Christians being persecuted for their faith. It gave them motivation to keep the faith and trust that the promises of God would indeed be fulfilled.

We cannot know in detail the nature of heaven or of the kingdom of God, but John's vision serves to inspire hope and faith that God will be victorious and that the final outcome will be of God's design. God is making all things new. Although the process remains hidden and shrouded in mystery, we know that the ultimate result will be grand and glorious. The saving power of God will stand triumphant.

Our questions about heaven and our own future on earth cannot be answered in precise detail, but John gives us a glimpse of eternal life. As we belong to God from our birth, our life will ultimately reside in the fullness of God's presence once again. God is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. God is with us in the beginning and our lives will end with God. The time in between is in our hands, and will be richer if spent in the presence of God as well.

Hans Kung writes, "Death is a passing into God, is a homecoming into God's mystery....I cannot stop halfway with my unconditional trust, but must follow the road consistently to its end...I entrust to this God everything, in fact what is absolutely final, victory over death....I have reasonable confidence that the almighty Creator, who calls us from not-being into being, can also call us from death into life....I am confident in the Creator and Conserver of the cosmos...that he has the last word as he had the first; that he is the God of the end as well as the God of the beginning: Alpha and Omega. Anyone who so believes then also in God's eternal life, believes in his own – in man's – eternal life."³

The God who loves us into being loves us through life and death and loves us into life beyond death. God is both the Creator and Completer of the process of life. Life begins with God and life is fulfilled with God. And so we can affirm that death is not the end, but rather a metamorphosis, a birth into new life.

There is a story about twins, sister and brother, talking to each other in the womb. The little sister says to her brother, "I believe that there is life after birth!"

Her brother vehemently protests, "No, no, this is all there is. This is a dark and cozy place, and we have nothing else to do but to cling on to the cord that feeds us."

But the little girl insists, "There must be something more than this dark place; there must be something else where there is light and freedom to move."

Still she cannot convince her twin brother. Then, after some silence, she says hesitantly, "I have something else to say, and I am afraid that you won't believe this either, but I think there is a mother!"

Her little brother now becomes furious. "A mother," he shouts, "A mother! What are you talking about? I have never seen a mother and neither have you. Who put that idea into your head? As I told you, this place is all we have! Why do you always want more? This is not such a bad place after all. We have all we need, so let's be content."

The little sister is quite overwhelmed by her brother's response and for a while doesn't dare to say anything more, but she can't let go of her thoughts. Since there is nobody else to speak to but her twin brother, she finally says, "Don't you feel those squeezes every once in a while? They really are quite unpleasant and sometimes even painful."

"Yes," he answers, "what's special about that?"

"Well," the sister says, "I think that these squeezes are there to get us ready for another place, much more beautiful than this, where we will see our mother face to face! Don't you think that's exciting?"

Her little brother doesn't answer. He is fed up with the foolish talk of his sister and feels that the best thing is to simply ignore her and hope that she will leave him alone.⁴

You and I know who was right. It took faith to believe that there indeed was life after birth. Likewise, belief in eternal life is ultimately a matter of trust. It is not something that can be proven by scientists or physicians or philosophers or theologians. Eternal life can only be glimpsed by faith in God. Our faith affirms that the God who loves us into being,

loves us through life, and loves us into eternal life with God. Thanks be to God! Amen.

¹ Hank Ketcham's *Dennis the Menace*, "Crystal Bowl," November 1-2, 2003.

² "Americans Describe Their Views About Life After Death," October 21, 2003, Barna Research Group, Ltd., Ventura, CA, www.barna.org.

³ Hans Kung, *Eternal Life?* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), pp. 113-114.

⁴ Henri J.M. Nouwen, "Out of Love, into Love," *Praying*, March/April 1994, p. 7.

Rev. Lori Best Sawdon
Lafayette United Methodist Church
Lafayette, CA