

HEAVEN TODAY: WHAT COMES TO MIND?

Matthew 4:12-17

*A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on the Second Sunday of Easter, May 1, 2011,
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FOCUS TEXT

Matthew 4:12-17

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

*‘Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—
the people who sat in darkness
have seen a great light,
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death
light has dawned.’*

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’

Today and over the next few Sundays I preach, I want to share with you some insights about one of the most commonly-held doctrines of the Christian faith: the doctrine of heaven.

- The insights will not be original with me.
- They will come from among the 675 places in the Old and New Testaments where the Bible speaks of “heaven.”
- These insights may be drawn from scholarly interpretation, theological analysis, devotional fervor, or artistic expression from across the centuries.¹

As we shall see, they are insights that are as much about life on earth as about life after death, and therefore they have implications concerning how “we live and move and have our being” in this life. I hope that by exploring these insights together, our understanding of heaven will be expanded, our lives on earth will be enriched, and we will entrust God even more with both our lives on earth and our lives after death.

Let us pray: *God our Maker, you sent your Son Jesus Christ who announced that your kingdom – the kingdom of Heaven – is “at hand.” As he made this announcement, he called us to turn to him to follow the ways of that reign. May through this sermon, the words of my mouth bear witness to that kingdom, and may all of us be given the ears to hear such soundings from your reign. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.*

¹ I am particularly using Christopher Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes: Rehearing the Gospel as News* (London: T & T Clark International, 2010).

I.

In 1941, New Testament scholar Rudolph Bultmann wrote that “there is no longer any heaven in the *traditional* sense.”²

Fifty-six years later, respected, humanist philosopher Isaiah Berlin is reported to have said, at age 88 on his deathbed, that heaven “makes no sense in any conceptual scheme” he knew.³

Speaking as public intellectuals, which both Bultmann and Berlin were, their comments about the disappearance or incomprehensibility of heaven were on one level accurate.

From the time of Copernicus and Galileo forward, our common view of the universe as a three-tiered structure with heaven above, a flat-earth in the middle, and hell below, has long since dissipated. With the advent in the twentieth century of theories of matter and anti-matter in astrophysics, subjects about which I know just enough to mention their names, it is true that from a *cosmological* viewpoint the “*traditional sense*” of heaven no longer exists” and that therefore there is no “conceptual *scheme*” in which *heaven* makes sense.⁴

But in over thirty years of being a Presbyterian minister, all of which have occurred after Bultmann’s statement and most after Berlin’s, it has been my experience that a sense of or at least hope for a traditional concept of heaven remains alive and well in the hearts that worship Sunday after Sunday in Presbyterian pews.”

- I have prayed countless times at funerals and memorial services, giving thanks that “deep in the human heart is an unquenchable trust that life does not end with death” and that “the Father, who made us, will care for us beyond the bounds of vision, even as He has cared for us in this earthly world.”⁵
- I have reminded grieving families and friends at the bedside of those who have just died that when we say “I believe in the communion of the saints,”⁶ we affirm our belief that not only are there saints on earth who sustain and inspire us, but also saints who have gone before us – parents and children, siblings and friends, spouses and church members and mentors and public leaders – into whose company we are welcomed and reunited when this life ends.
- I have sought to console families and individuals who have lost someone close by saying that the one who has passed away has moved from seeing God “in a mirror dimly” to seeing God “face to face,” to having an access to God unavailable in

² Morse 1.

³ Morse 21-22.

⁴ Morse 2-3.

⁵ *The Book of Common Worship* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, 1946), 210.

⁶ *The Apostles’ Creed*.

this life, to having questions answered, wounds healed, uncertainties resolved, restrictions physical, mental, and emotional eliminated.⁷

- To adult children who have lost a parent whose life on earth has been particularly devoted to family (most often a mother but sometimes a father), I have recited Paul's promise that the one departed now resides in "a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens," a house filled with even more beauty and love than the family to which they had instilled so much beauty and love on earth.⁸

The language I have inherited from and use on behalf of the church may not fit current understandings of science or cosmology, but that has never mattered much to me. Deep within *my* human heart is an unquenchable trust that life does not end with death.

II.

But even as I have been held in the palm of God's hand by this traditional concept of heaven, I am aware that neither *place* nor *time* is primary to my understanding of heaven.

- When someone asks me, as a pastor: "Where is heaven?" I typically answer: "We don't really know. Heaven may be 'in the clouds' or at the far reaches of the universe, but heaven is not so much a *place* as a *state of being*. Heaven is the state in which we are fully in God's presence. When we are in heaven, we are with God, even more fully than we are with God at special times on earth. "Now we see in a mirror dimly; *then*, face to face."
- Some have asked: "When we die do we go immediately to heaven or are we in some sort of limbo until Christ returns?" Whether the askers know it or not, such question reveals a dichotomy found within the writings of the Apostle Paul, who at one place implies that we proceed into heaven immediately upon our death,⁹ yet at another place speaks of the final resurrection as the time we enter heaven ourselves.¹⁰

What I usually say about the *timing* of heaven is this: When Jesus says in the gospel of John, "I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly,"¹¹ the word he uses for "life" (*zoe*) refers to something that

- comes from God
- begins prior to our time on earth
- yet continues after our death.

⁷ I Corinthians 13:12.

⁸ II Corinthians 5:1 *KJV*.

⁹ Philippians 1:19-26.

¹⁰ I Thessalonians 4:13-18.

¹¹ John 10:10.

In other words, the eternal life given by God, offered by Christ, begins in eternity, enters earthly existence, and continues into eternity. Eternal life cannot be measured by clock or calendar or compass.

III.

If heaven is more a *state* than a *place*, and if life eternal is something that exceeds our strict notions of *time*, perhaps the most far-reaching understanding to which I have come is the *direction* we think is involved concerning heaven.

(a)

When in the Apostles' Creed we say that Christ "ascended into heaven," we imply that heaven is somewhere away from us – "up" if you will – and that experiencing heaven involves *us* moving in a direction *from* where we are *to* where heaven is.

But listen for a minute to several Biblical passages, a scant three of the 675 that contain the word "heaven."¹²

When the people of Israel are freed from slavery, they find themselves in the wilderness threatened with starvation. They complain against their leaders Moses and Aaron. The Lord responds by saying: "I am going to rain bread *from heaven* for you." Sure enough, God rains bread, and every day the people eat the bread they need for that day. In addition to the phrase "daily bread," we get the phrase the phrase "manna from heaven" from this incident.

What is interesting is that the directional movement in this passage is not *from* the people of Israel *to* heaven, but rather *from* heaven *to* the people. It is "manna *from* heaven."¹³

(b)

Likewise, in John's Gospel, after feeding five thousand people and walking on water, Christ says to his disciples: "It was not Moses who gave you the bread *from heaven*, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread *from heaven*. For the bread of God is that which *comes down from heaven* and gives life to the world."

Jesus then adds: "I am the bread of life."¹⁴

Again, the direction is *from* heaven *to* earth, not *from* earth *to* heaven. It is *from* God to us, not *from* us to God.

¹² Morse 2.

¹³ Exodus 16.

¹⁴ John 6.

(c)

And in the passage Carolyn chanted in our hearing, after Christ's baptism and temptation in the wilderness, the time arrives for him to assume his public ministry.

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus leaves Nazareth, makes his home in Capernaum by the sea, and then utters his first public words as Messiah: "Repent, for the kingdom of *heaven* has come near."¹⁵

"Has *come* near." "Is *at hand*."

Once again, the direction is *from* God *to* us, not *from* us *to* God.

IV.

What does this directional trajectory tell us? What does it add to the traditional concepts of heaven we cherish to think about the kingdom of heaven coming *to* us?

(a)

First, this directional trajectory emphasizes the source of God's reign among us.

In American revivalism, which stems from the First Great Awakening of the eighteenth century, the dominant Protestant model of how one enters Christian faith in our country has been that of conversion. In revivalism, the preacher or revivalist seeks to present the gospel in such a way that it elicits an emotional response within the hearers, who then repent and turn to God so as to be assured of salvation, to be assured of heaven. In revivalism, as hearers of the gospel, we repent so that *we* can go *to* God.

But in the three passages we have just explored, the process is reversed. It is the kingdom of heaven that has "come near" us and *in light of which* we turn and repent.

- The Kingdom of Heaven – or reign and rule of God – comes near us in the life and work of Jesus Christ.
- In Christ, the Kingdom of Heaven is "at hand."
- In Christ, the Kingdom of Heaven has "come near."

In response, we turn and give Christ's reign and rule our full attention, our full devotion, our top priority. We seek to live in its power, answer its calls, adopt its ways.

Because it has come to us, we do not control it. We move toward it only because it has moved toward us. It has come to us as manna from heaven; we stop, take notice, partake, and eat.

¹⁵ Matthew 4.

(b)

Second, this directional trajectory *from* God *to* us locates the kingdom of heaven *in* our world.

When Jesus says, “The Kingdom of God has come near,” the phrase “come near” is very important. It can be translated “at hand,” “not far,” “in your midst.”

- This phrase recognizes that the reign and rule of God is coming from heaven to earth.
- But it also acknowledges that while it is very close, but it has not yet fully arrived.
- While the reign and rule of God is from heaven and at hand on earth, God’s reign does not approximate or conform to any state of affairs already in place on earth. His kingdom is “at hand” but not “in hand.”
- To say that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand implies that the reign and rule of God is not found within any intellectual, social, cultural, or philosophic system we know on earth, though it contains elements of many of them.
- This phrase implies that the reign and rule of God, while close, transcends and exceeds any capacity we have as human beings to approximate it or define it conceptually by means of some other frame of reference.

In other words, the reign and rule of God, which has “come near” and is “at hand,” comes to us on its own terms and can only be described in terms and ways that are native to it. It is what theologian Christopher Morse calls “proximity without approximation.”¹⁶

(c)

Third, to say that the kingdom of heaven has come near but has not yet fully taken root is to acknowledge that we live in two worlds. We live in the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of this world. We have dual citizenship.

In a minute or so, we will recite as our affirmation of faith words written in the third century to a man named Diognetus by someone observing and praising Christians from afar. The observer wrote:

While living in Greek and barbarian cities,
According as each obtained his lot,
And following the local customs,
Both in clothing and in food and in the rest of life,
[The Christians] show forth
The wonderful and confessedly strange character
Of the constitution of [their] own citizenship...
Their lot is cast “in the flesh”
But they do not live “after the flesh.”

¹⁶ Morse 21.

They pass their time upon the earth,
But they have their citizenship in heaven.¹⁷

The prayer I most cherish offering at funerals is one that occurs normally at the graveside. It is attributed to Cardinal Newman:

O Lord, support us all the day long,
Until the shadows lengthen and the evening comes,
And the busy world is hushed,
And the fever of life is over,
And our work is done.
Then in Thy mercy grant us a safe lodging,
And a holy rest,
And peace at the last;
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.¹⁸

It is the “drawn-nearness” of the reign of God – the kingdom of heaven – that lead us to do “our work” serving God in “the busy world” with “the fever of life.” It is through the nearness of the kingdom of heaven that Christ provides “support...all the day long.” And it is the promise of “safe lodging,” “holy rest,” and “peace at the last” that are with us as we “pass our time upon the earth” with our “citizenship in heaven.”

Amen.

¹⁷ Found in Morse 19.

¹⁸ *BCW* 214.