

Afterlife? An Alternative View

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God's domain is a mythic destination, like the promised land. We can have it only if we do not possess it. That is the ultimate irony of Jesus' talk about God's realm.
—Robert Funk, *A Credible Jesus*

Invitation to Worship: (Richard Jeffries)

It is eternity now.
I am in the midst of it.
It is about me, in the sunshine,
I am in it, as the butterfly in the light-laden air,
Nothing has to come,
It is now.
Now is eternity,
Now is the immortal life.

Ancient Witness: Mark 12:18-27

As we continue through Lent, we are reminded of our mortality, that “we are dust and to dust we shall return.” So, today’s subject is appropriate.

Sometimes I preach and expect that most people will agree with me. This is not one of those times. But that’s O.K. Good sermons should stimulate dialogue, not adulation. Good sermons should encourage thinking instead of act as a substitute for thinking. I hope this church is one of those precious few congregations that assumes it is O.K. to disagree with what is said from the pulpit. There are many legitimate paths. And my message today is we don’t have to follow a party line about a literal afterlife. While I try to be sensitive and respectful of other religious views, on the other hand I do not feel I need to shield or protect you from my own. So today, I start with a little story:

Once upon a time there was a woman who longed to find out what heaven is like. She prayed constantly, “O God, grant me in this life a vision of paradise.” She prayed in this way for years until one night she had a dream. In her dream an angel came and led her to heaven. They walked down a street in paradise until they came to an ordinary looking house. The angel, pointing toward the house said, “Go and look inside.”

So the woman walked in the house and found a person preparing supper, another reading the newspaper, and children playing with their toys. Naturally, she was disappointed and returned to the angel on the street. “Is this all there is to heaven?”

*The angel replied, “Those people you saw in that house are not in paradise, paradise is in them!” (Edward Hays in *Feathers on the Wind*)*

This is often how Jesus spoke about the kingdom of heaven. It is not so much a geographical place that we might inhabit; it is a state and a condition that inhabits us. “The kingdom of God is *within you*,” he said.

But the popular image of heaven is a *place* that we go to if we are good, the Good Place. People long for a “heavenly reward” when they die. On his “crusades” Billy Graham would always ask the question, “If you were to die tomorrow, do you know if you would go to heaven?” For Graham and millions of others, heaven is a *place* reserved for those who come forward and say that they “believe in Jesus.” This has been the primary motive of the missionary movement for years: take the message about Jesus to those who haven’t heard so that they might confess and therefore live eternally in their heavenly home.

That is not my view. I really don’t think about life after death very much, and when I do, it is not in the typical way of pearly gates and harps and clouds. I find that I agree a lot with Marcus Borg, who said that when it comes to the afterlife, he considers himself to be an agnostic. That is, he thinks that there is *something* at the end of the journey, but that’s about it. But ours is a minority view, I know.

Borg says that heaven-and-hell paradigm has been the dominant framework in Christianity. It’s what most Protestants and Catholics took for granted and shared in common not very long ago. And in this framework, the promise of an afterlife is the main point, the central reason. It seems to me that this just is playing into the fears and insecurities of people, and it panders to a lower level spiritual consciousness. As Einstein said, “If people are good only because they fear punishment and hope for reward, then we are a sorry lot indeed.” Brian MacLaren says that the church took a “path of transformation in this world” and turned it into “an evacuation plan to the next world.”

But no one becomes more holy through fear.

The deepest religious concern is not life *after* death; it’s life *before* death. It’s about awareness, enlightenment, peace and liberation from suffering in our present life.

Another U.C.C. minister and strong progressive colleague, Caleb Lines, recently put it like this:

The Hebrew Bible doesn’t have an understanding of the afterlife because the ancient Israelites who became the Jewish people didn’t believe in one. In fact, they believed that the human soul was tied to breath, and that’s why in Genesis life is defined as beginning at first breath and why life ends at last breath. Now, a couple centuries before Jesus lived, some Jewish people began to flirt with the idea of an afterlife but by and large, people didn’t believe in that. Jesus and most of the people to whom he was speaking likely didn’t believe in an afterlife.

So, for a thousand years Judaism had no concept of an afterlife whatsoever. The idea of special places of a reward for the righteous and punishment for the unrighteous can be traced to Zoroastrianism, the religion of the Persian empire. The influence of Persia came after it defeated Babylon around 539 B.C.E. Some Jews declared that the Persian leader, Cyrus, who defeated the Babylonians and allowed the exiled Jews to return to Judah, was the Messiah or God’s anointed one. It was around this time that some in Judaism appropriated the concept of life after

death from Zoroastrianism. Centuries later, the realm of the dead underwent even more transformation:

*The fact that in the 2nd century B.C. there was movement in Sheol, where the dead had slept forever, is connected with the Maccabean wars. Like Valhalla among the Germanic peoples, heaven among the Jews first came into view for the warriors (read “martyrs”). With that, the realm of the dead was degraded to the abode of nonheroes and civilians. (Uta Ranke-Heinemann, *Putting Away Childish Things*, p. 231)*

So, Sheol changed from this kind of neutral place, this kingdom of *all* the dead, into kind of a waiting room for the righteous before they are resurrected and for the unrighteous before they are sent to eternal punishment. It was split in two. You might remember the parable of Lazarus and the rich man. Each of them went to Sheol, but they went to different sections that were separated by a great chasm.

Then the Greek doctrine of the immortality of the soul changed these views even more.

Now they believed that the souls of the just no longer went, even temporarily, like Abraham and Lazarus, into the kingdom of the dead. Instead they went off immediately to the heights of heaven...

Thus the good no longer make any temporary stop in Sheol, which is turned into the place for punishing the godless. The erstwhile kingdom of all the dead, good and evil, has become a place of damnation. (Ranke-Heinemann, p. 235-6)

Since then, in Christian history, there has been quite a lot of diversity about the afterlife. For example, Borg points out that some have believed that the afterlife begins the moment after death, while some believe that it begins at the last judgment at the end of time. In fact, for the first thousand years, the dominant Christian view was that the dead were simply dead until the last judgment.

And then there’s the question of continuity between this life and the life beyond. Does our awareness of our personal identity stay with us? Will we still have a sense of who we are like we do today? I share Borg’s doubts about this, and we are in a minority, I am sure. He writes:

*When I think of the best moments in my life thus far, they are moments when I was so wholly involved in the experience that there was no part of me left over being aware that it was me having the experience. That is, my best moments have been moments when awareness of being this particular person were not part of the experience. Given this, does it seem that preservation of identity awareness in an afterlife is important or even desirable? (*The God We Never Knew*, p.175)*

In the New Testament passage we read this morning, the Sadducees are a group that did not believe in an afterlife. And to show that the idea of an afterlife did not make sense, they told Jesus a story of a woman who was married seven times—brothers who died one after the other. Then they asked, whose wife she would she be in the afterlife? It was a trick question.

Borg points out that this question only makes sense if you think of the afterlife as having continuity with this life. The only image of an afterlife they were working with was one that

assumed that a person would still be that same person in heaven. And this is the typical view of afterlife today, a literal continuation of an individual consciousness and identity. Jesus' response, says Borg, points to *discontinuity*, however. And you can sense his impatience with the level of spiritual consciousness from which the question comes. Jesus says, "they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like the angels in heaven." Will I still be the person, Steve, in the afterlife? No, I tend to believe that the boundaries that separate us as individuals disappear, and we merge into One, a single, Universal Consciousness.

Mostly, I am an agnostic when it comes to the afterlife. I feel that there is something beyond, but that is about it. The image of heaven makes the most sense to me when we talk about the here and now, a reality that is within us in the present, unseen and invisible. When I die, "Steve" simply will cease to exist.

Robert Funk talks about heaven as a "mythic destination," like the promised land was for the Israelites, who found themselves wandering in the wilderness after the exodus. He writes:

The moral of this epic tale seems to be that the promised land is some hypothetical destination which we are not permitted to reach. There will always be some further desert to cross, some new challenge to meet, some new enemy to love, some new attachments to forsake, some new boundaries to cross. It is the journey and not the arrival that constitutes our salvation. This is the ultimate vision of Jesus.

But is that all that heaven is—an unattainable goal or an internal state of mind? I happen to believe that there is something more, and that it is connected to memory. Rabbi Harold Kushner once wrote (*How Good Do We Have to Be?*),

Memory is what ultimately gives us power over death, by keeping the person alive in our hearts. Memory is what gives us power over time, by keeping the past present so that it cannot fade and rob us of what we once held precious.

In a finite and limited sense, this is true with human beings. Those who touch our lives live on in us. And we, in turn, live on in the lives and the memory of others. But I think we can say even more than this. We can say that in an eternal and ultimate sense, we live on in the memory of God. We are kept alive in the heart of God forever. God's presence that will never fade keeps our lives, our past moments eternally present. Is that an afterlife? No, not in any conventional sense.

There's a children's book, *For Heaven's Sake*, by Rabbi Sandy Sasso. In the story, a young boy, Isaiah, wonders about heaven, and none of the answers he receives satisfies him. Finally he remembers that people said that his grandfather went to heaven after he died a few months earlier. So Isaiah asks his grandmother, and she agrees to help him look for heaven. She takes him first to a soup kitchen where his grandfather volunteered, then to story hour at the library and finally to a choir rehearsal. Isaiah enjoys the visits but doesn't understand. Finally his grandmother explains:

I think we can get close to heaven and to God in a place in our hearts. I feel there is a part of Grandpa in all the places and people we visited today, and a little bit of heaven, too.

Heaven is in the here and now. It is found at the heart of all things, invisible and hidden. It is not just a place we inhabit, but it inhabits us. Deep at our core, it is there. And when we touch others, we become a part of them, and we live on. And in our hearts and memories, we keep others alive, too.

And yet, there is also something more, something unknown. What this something looks like, I cannot say. Here is what I believe: Just as I am a part of God today, I will always be a part of God. “When we die,” says Borg, “we do not die into nothingness but we die into God.” I like that statement, “we die *into God*.” He borrows it from Paul, actually:

If we live, we live into God; and if we die, we die into God. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are God’s. (Romans 8:38)

Every moment, God experiences us, lovingly takes us in—the way a parent relishes and takes in their child—and makes us part of the Sacred Memory. In this journey on earth, we are *already* in heaven, and heaven is *already* in us. God is alive in us today, and we are mysteriously a part of the life of God, right now. For me, this is enough.

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)

Suggested Reading:

Eternal Life: A New Vision, Beyond Religion, Beyond Theism, Beyond Heaven and Hell,
John Shelby Spong

The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith, Marcus Borg

Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power—And How They Can Be Restored, Marcus Borg