

What on earth are we hoping for? What is “heaven?”

Revelation 21:1-2: Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

Our first glimpse of heaven comes on a wedding day; that magic moment when the groom looks down the aisle, and for the first time, he sees her as he has never seen her before; the bride, his bride wearing the dress of a lifetime; she sees him; he sees her. Wow!

When a husband and wife consecrate their love by getting married, the following story may be told: A man was lying on his death bed when suddenly he smelled something wonderful; he smelled lemon bars; that sweet citrusy confection; he could smell the lemon zest! And he thought to himself, “How wonderful! My loving wife has made my favorite cookie to comfort me.” Somehow, drawing upon his last reserves, he rises from his bed and makes his way to the kitchen. He could see them; they were still warm; the powdered sugar was still white as it began to sink into the filling. He could see them; he could almost taste them; he had to have one, and as he reaches out to take it – WHACK!! His wife swatted his hand with a spatula and said, “Don’t touch those! They’re for after the funeral.”

What on earth are we hoping for? What comes after the funeral? What is “heaven?” Heaven is home, sweet home, so don’t be a stranger.

✦ Home, Sweet Home

Novelist Frederick Buechner wrote: “*Home sweet home. There’s no place like home. Home is where you hang your hat...* Home is the sailor, home from the sea, /and the hunter home from the hill.” What the word *home* brings to mind before anything else, I believe, is a place, and in its fullest sense not just the place where you happen to be living at the time, but a very special place with very special attributes which make it clearly distinguishable from all other places. The word *home*

summons up a place – more specifically a house within that place – which you have rich and complex feelings about, a place where you feel, or did feel once, uniquely *at home*, which is to say a place where you feel like you belong and which in some sense belongs to you, a place where you feel that all is somehow ultimately well even if things aren’t going all that well at any given moment.¹

Heaven is our home sweet home; it is the fulfillment of our deepest longings, the satisfaction of our most powerful yearnings: In heaven, *Revelation 21:4 (NRSV) he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.*”The first things, the world we have known; the world in which we wander feeling lost and alone and confused, and sometimes even godforsaken; those things have passed away, and we’re where we belong; we’re in heaven; we’re at home, and “all shall be well, all shall be well, all manner of things shall be well.”² It’s good to be home.

We often stop at this point when we think about heaven, and why not? It’s a good place to stop, but we’ve only just begun; we’ve barely broken the surface of what God has in store for us. We limit heaven, as absurd a concept as that is – limiting heaven, to what heaven will *feel* like, to what is in it for us; our image of heaven owes far more to medieval authors like Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* and Dante’s *Divine Comedy* than to the Bible. Our image of heaven is of eternal bliss; no cares, no worries, we’re in heaven and in the words of the late great Harry Kalas, [we are] “outta here!”

That’s a lot to hope for; but it’s not enough. Heaven is more than a holy fire escape. Heaven is more than getting out of the pain and suffering of this world. Heaven comes to earth and “*the sea is no more.*”The sea is where the antichrist and beast come from. The sea is the source of all of this world’s trouble, but when heaven comes, the sea is no more. The work is done! We’re not leaving a mess for the next generation. It’s all clean. It’s all right. Our work is done, and we can rest.

¹ Frederick Buechner, *The Longing for Home*. (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996) 7.

² Julian of Norwich

An otherworldly heaven isn't enough. As enticing as [we are] outta here!" can be; it doesn't take us home. Home is a place; heaven is a place, our place, where we belong and are at home, and the vision of Revelation shows heaven coming to earth rather than fleeing from earth; we see the holy city (can we even say that with a straight face in a suburb of Reading and Philadelphia?) prepared as bride adorned for her husband.

Can you imagine Reading with that kind of splendor, or Philadelphia, or your home and workplace? Can you imagine the most important relationships in your life inspiring in you the kind of awe-filled wonder that a bride does in her groom on their wedding day? Isn't that possibility worth working for? Isn't it worth giving your blood, sweat, and tears for? Isn't it worth living for?

Heaven is a place; heaven is the future of this place, this world, and God's future is continually breaking into the here and now. We catch glimpses of it from time to time, and the beauty of that vision is almost more than we can bear. Could it be that this is one of the reasons why so many cry at weddings?

Heaven is a place; it is our place; the place where we supremely belong; the place we are meant for. When we die; we go to heaven; we go home. While we live, offer God your blood, sweat, and tears, in the sure and certain hope that this world is being made new. We do our part; God does His; heaven comes to us, dries our tears, and we see that we are finally home sweet home.

✦ Don't Be a Stranger

Heaven is our home, so don't be a stranger.

We've talked about heaven; now, a word about hell. *Revelation 21:8 (NRSV) But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars,*

their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”

The Bible doesn't talk about “them.” The Bible reveals “us.” And the ugly reality is that sometimes we don't do our part; sometimes we have the opportunity to offer a glimpse of heaven here on earth, but instead we let fear rule our hearts; we lack the faith to step up, and on and on. We do things we shouldn't do, and we don't do things we should do.

We are strangers, when God yearns to call us friend. We are strangers, when by God's grace, we are family destined (predestined) for the family home; but, if we don't come home when we're called, if we choose to embrace the values and vices that will not last beyond this world, God will finally say to us, “Thy will be done.” In the words of the German mystic Meister Eckhart, “God is at home, it's we who have gone out for a walk.”

And I wonder, what will become of those in the lake of fire? Is the second death it, or is there one more trick to resurrection and life? Does the fire destroy us, or does it refine us? Does it consume our dross and chaff and leave pure gold behind?

I wonder, but whatever the purpose hell has in God's plan, it is a warning to us: Our lives matter. Our choices matter. We make a difference, either for good or for ill, so will we be a friend of God or a foe, family or a stranger?

Don't be a stranger. Heaven is our home, so live like you belong. Offer a glimpse of heaven through the way you live, the “world” you create one choice at a time, one relationship at a time. Don't be a stranger. Be the child of God you are! God has a place for you; you will enjoy the company when you discover you are in heaven, our home, sweet home. Amen.