

II Kings 2:9-12, I Peter 1:3-9
“I can only imagine”

I have heard from a number of you that you are enjoying this sermon series on the Apostles' Creed. It is always helpful for me to ask myself and clarify for myself time after time exactly what I believe. It is also nice to know in this era when relativity seems to rule that we actually do believe in quantifiable, concrete truths, that have been unchanging for thousands of years. When you say I believe, you better be able to back it up with a statement that you can stand behind. This is what we have in the Apostles' Creed.

So far we have said that we believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth. And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried. We believe that Jesus descended into hell, and that on the third day he rose again from the dead. Today we say that Jesus ascended into heaven.

So what do you believe about heaven? What is heaven, if clouds and chubby little cute white angels playing harps enter your mind, block it out of your mind. This is not where we are going today. We are going to look at a lot of Scripture today so be ready to open your Bibles and read along. I Corinthians 2:9, tells us that No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him. This should give you some indication that today we are on some shaky ground. But we at least have some ground to stand on.

So today we are going to dream, with our eyes open, we are going to imagine that place that no one has seen, heard, or conceived and we are going to use I Peter 1:3-9 which gives us as good a description as we can find in Scripture of what those who love God, of what we have to look forward to as a reward or as an outcome for our faith in Jesus Christ.

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When we looked at the phrase descended into hell we worked from the premise that hell is an actual, physical location. I am going to be working from that same premise today when we talk about heaven. Heaven, first of all is an actual physical location. In the Old Testament the word is never used in the singular, it is always in the plural such as our II Kings reading. Elijah actually disappeared into the heavens. It is quite an

incredible verse. Follow along if you will. Elisha, his protégé, actually watches him carried off into heaven by this chariot of fire accompanied by horses of fire. He knew that Elijah was going accompanied to meet his Creator, but even then, “he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.”

A central aspect of our Christian faith is to say with confidence that we believe that the person who either lies before us in a coffin or whose body is no longer with us but in ash, has already been carried off into heaven, and this should leave us with a joy that no one can take from us. When we say ascended into heaven it is meant to be a sounding cymbal of joy that is to mark each of our lives and built up an anticipation for each one of us of what comes next. But it is always a bit of a step for us to be able to piece all those things together. At funerals we are more likely to tear our clothes in two than to sing at the top of the our lungs, when the Saints go Marching in and dance along with the crowd.

Today is not ascension Sunday, that takes place on May 1st, but that is where we find ourselves in this creed. Jesus ascending into heaven, a heaven that we are going to define. Where do we find the ascension in the Bible?

After Jesus was raised from the dead he spent some time, Acts chapter 1 says 40 days, with his disciples teaching them, training them, getting them ready for the coming of the Holy Spirit which was seen on the day of Pentecost. He then leaves his disciples in Acts 1 verses 10-11 and as they stare at him an angel says what are you doing staring at him, get to work. The disciples don't tear their clothes, they are more dumbfounded than anything. The ascension of Christ, the taking up of Christ into heaven was a sign to believers that Christ has given us all we need in order to do his work here on this earth. This is the ascension, the taking up of Christ into heaven after his resurrection which allowed the Holy Spirit to come and fill the church and ultimately completely prepare his disciples for the task at hand. But today we are looking at heaven, but you have to understand the ascension before we can look at heaven.

Okay, now lets look at heaven. John 14 is the classic chapter on heaven that we use repeatedly. In vs. 2 Jesus talks about heaven as a house with many rooms. So when we say that Jesus ascended into heaven we do not mean that he just disappeared or vaporized, but rather that as the disciples stare into the sky they see him go into heaven.

I Corinthians 15:50-53 reminds us that in heaven our bodies will be glorified and made perfect. Yes, heaven is where our bodies, our minds, our hearts have no trace of corruption or defect, we are undefiled and perfect and we are in complete harmony with our Savior Jesus Christ. Heaven is not a place on earth, but rather a place where once our earthly body passes, we are given a new one by our Creator in order to be in perfect communion and relationship with our Savior.

I Peter gives us some Scriptural teeth to this assurance that we have in what heaven is going to be like. Even though we are so limited in the words we use to describe a heavenly concept in earthly terms, we are trying today. Any earthly joy pales in comparison to what heaven will be like.

Let's turn to I Peter and look at our Scripture and lay out two concepts about heaven that are crucial to understand. He begins by making it very clear that the living hope that we have has as its source in whom? That's right, verse 3 tells us Jesus Christ. There should be no doubt in anyone's mind that if Christ is absent, then heaven is absent. Scripture makes it clear that there is no other way to get to heaven if not only by the blood of Jesus Christ. In fact, by the resurrection Jesus has given us this hope. This is the first point that has to be clear. Heaven can only be defined in light of the mercy of Jesus Christ and in light of those who love Christ.

Secondly when we talk about heaven Peter uses the term inheritance to describe how we receive it, you can see that in verse 4. We find ourselves as Christians called heirs with Christ throughout Scripture. But we are heirs not because of the family that we are born into but rather through the faith that we obtain in our life we are able to obtain that goal of eternal life that we have been striving for. The term heir applies to those of faith who have gone before us, this is our inheritance. You know we are used to thinking of inheritance as something that those who die leave behind. The Bible sees it as exactly the opposite. Our inheritance of faith is what we take with us when we die which really allows us to enjoy the benefits of being a part of God's family. Our inheritance comes to us when we die, it is the glory and joy of heaven.

So what does heaven look like? We already saw John talk about a house. But will we recognize our loved ones who have gone before us? Do we believe that heaven is truly all that it is cracked up to be? John in Revelation 4:1 is given a sneak peak of

heaven when the door to heaven is left open. Paul, likewise, in I Corinthians 2:9 was given special privilege to see what is in store for us in the life to come. I have talked to dozens of people, who have had near death experiences where they were at such peace, a peace that truly passes all understanding and they are convinced that they were given that insight in order not to be afraid of death that will come, but that will lead to more joy than we can possibly imagine.

A description of heaven must start in Revelation 21 that tells us of a new heaven and a new earth right from the beginning in vs. 1. Where there is no more weeping, or crying or mourning or pain or suffering, no worrying about a country where cities burn because a demographic group has historically been disenfranchised and gone from slavery to prison, you don't see in heaven a city with a majority of residents being people of color while no one representing them on the city government, that doesn't happen in heaven. In heaven we don't have to cover up past lies and hurts, no need for anything in heaven but our love for Christ Jesus.

Remember Peter told us that we are going to experience some suffering on this earth. That is part of life. This is a time when our faith will be tested. So often Christianity is sold with the promise that accepting Jesus as Savior will lead to prosperity in life and a trouble free future. We are told that heaven is a place on earth and all you have to do is accept Jesus and then your life gets better. But look at the disciples. They didn't have to follow Jesus and from the moment they did they didn't have a place to lay their head and each one was martyred. Not a real positive advertisement for being a disciple, is it? Heaven is not a place on earth, and the faith that we have in Christ now is not a get out of jail free card or get out of trouble free pass on this earth.

But with Christ as our center we can be assured, we must be able to live with utmost and complete confidence that our inheritance will be imperishable, undefiled, and unfading. We need to have that peace that passes all understanding that with our faith in Christ even though we don't see Christ now, even though we don't know him now face to face, we will obtain the outcome of our faith which is the salvation of our souls.

Brothers and sisters, what is heaven like? I don't know exactly. I do know that we will experience more joy than we ever have in our life. Will we recognize each other, I think so, Mary recognized the risen Christ and called him teacher. Our faith allows us

the security to know that when we die, that is what we inherit. What will it be like when we die? What will Christ look like when he comes to greet us? I can only imagine. I can only imagine.