

Sermon Text for September 7, 2025

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Isaiah 26:19, Matthew 22:23-33

“What does heaven look like?”

There aren't many topics that are as popular for people to consider and talk about than heaven. Whenever I ask people what book of the Bible they want to study, almost inevitably Revelation will come up because for some that book of the Bible gives us an insight into heaven and how God will conquer all. People are curious about heaven and want to have definitive answers about heaven and so books upon books are written including Heaven is for real with account of happenings on earth that prove what heaven is like.

People want to know what heaven is like also because they want to know what their future relationship will be like with people who have passed on, or even with animals that have passed on. Our dear Ellie, our Bernese and shepherd mix, passed on about a month ago, I'm only bringing it up now because you know me, I'm an emotional mess in front of you, I don't have a filter or any emotional control so a little distance sometimes is good. It was very, very sudden and really it wasn't until she was gone that we realized how much she was a part of the family. I would love to see her again in heaven, is that actually a thing? These are some of the questions that we have in regards to heaven and some are answerable, but most are not, regardless of the amount of books that have been written on the subject.

We are not short on Scripture that describes heaven to us. Some use incredibly hyperbolic language such as in Revelation where it talks about streets of gold and gates made of pearls. Some of us need that, some of us need to be told what heaven is going to be like because we simply need to know and we need to be able to capture it for our sake. Today Jesus is confronted once again while he is in the temple in the last week of his life and this time it is a theological topic and it is the topic of heaven.

His answer provides us with more answers than questions, which is unusual, because normally it is the other way around, isn't it with Jesus and when he is tested and questioned by people. But he also dispels some false notions that we may have about heaven, ideas that are nice and comforting, but simply not grounded in Scripture or in reality. Jesus sees heaven not as a complicated topic, he answers the question simply and clearly, but it seems like we want to give it a life of its own. Let's read.

READ

I love that we are a week into our Bible Reading challenge. It is not too late to join us, it is never too late, you can always pick up where we are. But here at First Presbyterian we believe in the authority of Scripture as it was Spirit breathed by God and also as we read it the Holy Spirit leads us and directs us as well. So as we have read Scripture this week I can't help but find points of contact between what we read and what look at on Sunday morning. We always begin with Scripture and interpret it, we don't choose a topic or a theme and then find Scripture to fit into the points that we want to make. It is dangerous doing that because you can justify anything using Scripture out of context.

So we begin with our first Scripture today from Isaiah that is one of many that address the resurrection. It describes the resurrection as an opportunity to sing for joy as the earth gives birth to those long dead. That same image is picked up in Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones where the bones are raised up and create an army. Daniel 12:2 we read "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life." Also in Hebrews 11:19 we find a shout out to the Old Testament as the author states that Abraham was not reticent to give up his son Isaac because: "he considered the fact that God is able to even raise someone from the dead."

So today Jesus is confronted by one more group of religious leaders as they all seemed to line up up to now to question him and try to get him to say something that he regretted and that would put him in trouble. On this day, a few days after he rode in on a donkey and cleared the temple and a few days before his death, they sent to him the chief priests, the elders, the Pharisees, the scribes, the Herodians, all of them had a go at him, and now today it is the Sadducees. The Sadducees were a little different in the church of those days, I say church knowing full well that it was the synagogue but just so that we understand who these people were, because they did not believe in the resurrection.

Now, this is a big deal. They were in the Belinda Carlisle school of thought that states simply that heaven is a place on earth, period. There is nothing after this life and in fact, the Sadducees believed, that this was the only way to get humans to take full responsibility for their actions in this world because there was no other world. They were strict literalists in the Scriptures that we read before saying that all of these things happened on this earth, the dead were raised to live again on this earth in our time period, but not in a resurrection of eternal life that is to come later.

There is some truth to their thinking because there is danger in believing that the resurrection is all that matters, or that eternal life is all that we have to live for, because then

what we do on this earth matters much less. Heaven can become an excuse to be a crummy person here on this earth. I'm not perfect, just forgiven leads to us thinking that because we are forgiven, because we have the promised eternal life in front of us what we do in this life doesn't matter at all, and that is heresy.

But the more common heresy that we find circulating in Christian circles, is the approach of thinking that what we do here on earth, the sum of our good actions, will somehow get us into heaven. Heaven is not a prize that we receive because we have been good. The Wired Word Sunday School class is looking at that topic today. It is so common within churches to think that all that matters is that you are good to people and somehow somehow we will get into God's good graces as a result. I have good news to tell you. We are already under God's good graces, Because even while we were yet sinners, God sent his only Son to die for us so that we could have eternal life. We don't have to be good to win God's good graces.

What we do here in this church in relationship to Matthew 25, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, is not because we want to win our way into heaven, no, it is a response to the grace and the glory that is before us and we know that this is the right thing to do. We want to love people because God first loved us. A personal relationship with Jesus takes away the fear that God somehow might change his mind and tally up our score and find us lacking. That has already happened and so God has taken it into his own hands to settle the score forever in Jesus. Our relationship with Jesus is secure, heaven is secure, so we no longer have to live in fear and anxiety wondering if we are in or out. God has already done the work for that. Jesus himself said to Martha – I am the resurrection and the life, those who believe in me will never die.

So now that this is settled, what is heaven actually like? I would love to be able to see my dad again and ask him questions about his work in the church as he rubbed elbows with the movers and the shakers. I would love to ask him advice now and hear stories that would fill my heart. Will I know him and recognize him? This is at the core of the question that the Sadducees ask Jesus. Their question about a widow who marries 7 brothers finds its lawfulness in Deuteronomy 25:5-10 which required a widow to marry a brother so that the deceased brother's name would be continued.

But at the core of it all the error of the Sadducees is that they denied heaven and the resurrection. They ask the question who then is her husband in a way in Greek that doesn't come across in the English. In the Greek it is far more crude and not meant for church, but basically they said that each of these brothers fully consummated their relationship with her so in heaven

who will be the one who is able to lie with her. The nuance in Scripture is incredible if we take the time to study it. Their question is less about the resurrection and more about carnal desire, but posed within the framework of the resurrection.

Jesus' answer to them is simply that "You do not understand the power of God nor the resurrection." Both of which, by the way, are true and real and not made up. Our attempt to put heaven on earth and to put the parameters that we have here on earth on heaven is foolish. WE do that today as well. In heaven the civil and religious rules that we have created no longer exist. We try to frame what we don't understand into wording and concepts that we can grasp but heaven is beyond our imagination. We use terms like jewels in our crown which we find in Scripture to attribute to some people some special status that clearly does not exist in heaven.

We find heaven described most clearly by the Apostle Paul in I Corinthians 15 where he describes that we will have perfect resurrected bodies in heaven. As Jesus states we will be like the angels, but without wings folks. This new heaven and this new earth is so far beyond our comprehension that no amount of near death experiences will be able to provide us with insight. That is another attempt for us to quantify the unquantifiable. As Paul states we believe in the resurrection of the body in heaven. It is not that the body wastes away and our soul is immortal. No, that is not heaven and that is not what we believe.

We will be perfect, all of us, our bodies will be perfect, all of us, in heaven. You see the God of the Sadducees was too small for heaven and so can be called the God of the dead. If God is truly God then the raising of the dead should not be a problem. We only retreat to metaphor when we speak of heaven and hell when our faith in an all-powerful God is limited or weak. We can't believe in the resurrection if we serve a small and weak God.

The future reality in which we will be living in heaven is both continuous in some ways from this earthly life, and discontinuous in other ways. In my high school yearbook I wrote: Life is awesome, and then you go to heaven. The implication is that heaven is awesomer. May God bless us and keep us as we look to the grace of God to assure us of the joy we will experience in heaven. Amen.