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“Old Heaven and New Heaven”

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All Saints Day (Year B)

November 1, 2015

Wisdom of Solomon 3:1–9; Revelation 21:1–6a; John 11:32–44

Would you think it strange or would you think I’m strange if I told you
that All Saints’ Day reminds me of the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade?

On this day when we pay homage to all the saints, martyrs, and faithful ones
deceased in the church, it feels to me as if every one of us arrives
tethered to a saint or two in another dimension.

I bring my mother, my father, my grandmother, a close friend who died recently
to this holiest of Christian festivals.

Hundreds of others are hovering in this sanctuary, just beyond sight,
as we hold tightly to them in our memories, and we bring them with us
into this time of worship, holy communion, and communion of the saints.

It’s something of a family reunion for us, as I imagine it:
the living and the dead still connected and tugging at one another
and related to each other in that way.

I love a good parade, and a parade of saints, of those whom we have loved,
is just about as good as it gets.

That other dimension, the one veiled just beyond our sight,
the one we might call heaven, we tend to not talk about very much anymore,
which I think is short-sighted.

Even in church, we tend to limit the heavenly conversation to Easter Sunday
or to funerals until an unchurched person like the neurologist Eben Alexander
comes along and raises the issue in his book, *Proof of Heaven*.

Alexander posits his proof of heaven after his near-death-experience
of another dimension while he lay in a seven-day coma

as a result of bacterial meningitis.

When a physician and scientist like Alexander talks about heaven,
it becomes a best-seller and we perk up our ears.

When the church talks about heaven, we seem less assured.
Why is that, I wonder?

Our passage today from the Wisdom of Solomon hints at that other dimension,
just beyond the veil our human perception and understanding.

This particular writing comes from the first century BCE,
from a time between the testaments old and new,
and between the paradigm change as to what the people of God were thinking
about life after life for the saints.

The Wisdom of Solomon is not in our Protestant Bibles,
but it is among the secondary texts of the Catholic Bible and other translations,
that we refer to as deuterocanonical:

a secondary canon of approved texts.

And it has wormed its way into our accepted Scriptures over the years
because it is just so darn comforting for those of us
who have ever lost a loved one

and who are concerned about what happens to them after death.

Previous Hebrew concepts concerning afterlife prior to Jesus and prior to this writing
taught that all souls, good or bad, went to Sheol,

that shadowy place of the dead, where they would remain until the Day of the Lord.

This intertestamental piece introduces new insights into Sheol,
influenced by Greek philosophy, and attests that the souls of the righteous,
the saints, are in the hand of God, where no torment
or suffering will ever touch them (3:1).

It says they are at peace, that their hope is full of immortality,
implying that death is not the last stop for them,

but instead the beginning of a new journey with God (3:3b, 4b).

It claims that what looked like suffering, like punishment, like pain, like travail,
was actually purification in order to make them acceptable to God.

And in the time of their visitation, or of their union with God,
they will shine forth and run like sparks through stubble.

Furthermore, they will have purpose and vocation when they are in the hand of God,
for the saints will govern the nations and rule over peoples
just as the Lord rules over them (3:8).

This implies that they are still connected to us

and concerned about us and about the well-being of all people

that on earth do dwell.

I like to imagine some of the saints of this church whom we have lost this year
and consider their work on-going as they continue in fellowship with God.

I like to imagine **BJ Seitzer** still reading a book a day;

I like to imagine **Anne Leathers** still churning out her beautiful handiwork;

I like to imagine **Anne Martin** still conjuring up the perfect gift;

I like to imagine **Ed Kwon** still building community across lines
of race, creed, gender, color and class;

I like to imagine **Jacque Robins** tending hundreds of rose bushes and being the boss
of an even larger family of God;

I like to imagine **Diana Huggin** making beautiful music;

I like to imagine **Justin Radtke** as another Francis of Assisi, a patron saint
of animals and the environment.

I like to imagine little **Seth Brown** being little Seth Brown.

I like to imagine the things that our loved ones contributed to our life together
continuing into the next life, as the faithful abide with God
in love, in grace, and in mercy.

This is the heaven, the next life, the other dimension to this life,
which the Wisdom of Solomon evokes for us.

The foolish, it says, have eyes that cannot see it; they are as blind as
Bartimaeus, the beggar, who called out to Jesus, "Please, let me see again!"
They want to pop our balloons.

They see death only as disaster. They think that all is lost.

They see destruction as cause only for despair.

But to those who are faithful, to those who have been disciplined a little,
they will receive great good, the Wisdom of Solomon affirms.

Our Christian understanding of heaven transitions even more
through the subsequent life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

When Jesus rolls away the stone from Lazarus' grave after four days of death
and summons Lazarus to "come out" from death into life,

we have a hint of an embodied resurrection that is different even more
from the Hebrew shadowy Sheol or from the Greek immortality of the soul.

To be in heaven hereafter will be a new life in that other dimension,
unbound, and free from the sin and disease that kills the body,
yet alive again in continuity with the face and feet
and features that identified us before.

And then the reading from Revelation suggests a new heaven altogether:
a new heaven that will be made manifest on earth,
a restoration of the whole of God's created order, right here on earth.
John's vision of hope for a new beginning is actually a revoicing of the prophet's
similar vision in Isaiah 65:17–25, both coming out of extreme distress
when God's people were either suffering from persecution or from exile.
The vision of both is for a relational theology, centered in God's ongoing
care for all of creation and for its needs which, while centered in
our physical world, will expand into all spheres of life
which are threatened by sin and death.

(See Terence Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament*, p. 8–9)

The saints will not travel to be with God; God will be here with us mortals.

To paraphrase the 100th Psalm, we will be God's people

and the sheep of God's pasture, in God's presence, here on new earth.

And God will comfort, comfort the saints. And God will destroy the last enemy, death.

And God will eliminate the crying and heartache and pain that
accompany death because it will no longer be a factor.

Life will triumph for the saints. Newness will clothe the saints.

Communion with God and with one another will abound as God's salvific activity
catches up every creature in the natural order, including dogs, I think.

"God is always a God of surprises," says Biblical scholar N.T. Wright (p. 184).

"What happens to me after death is not the major, central, framing question
that centuries of theological tradition have supposed," Wright says.

"The New Testament, true to its Old Testament roots, regularly insists
that the major, central, framing question is that of God's purpose
of rescue and of re-creation for the whole world, the entire cosmos...

How will the God's new creation come?

And how will we humans contribute to that renewal of creation
and to the fresh projects that the creator God will launch in God's new world?"

(NT Wright. *Surprised by Hope*, p. 184–185)

That is the surprise and the mystery that dawns for us with each new day.

And so as Dr. Ebird, our Bible teacher from Duke Divinity School, is fond of saying,
you can pay your money and take your pick.

How do we envision the life to come, heaven, the dimension of the saints
who have gone before us?

Do we envision it as a shadowy holding place until the day of the Lord,
as the continued life of the soul in the hand of God,

as resurrection of the body and the life everlasting in the way of Jesus,
or as a realized eschatology here on earth where God restores
and recreates all creation as it should be?

Maybe the answer is all of the above or all of the beyond!

Or is it all just too hard to believe?

After our last difficult funeral here at the church,

one person came up to me following the service and said,

“You know, this is just so tragic, I find it hard to believe any of this.

When a young person dies, especially,

how can we believe any of this to be true?”

And I tightened up the cord on my tethered saints

and pulled them a little closer to my heart,

fearful, mainly, that he also might be right, and replied,

“Perhaps some of us have to believe for those who can’t always believe.”

Sometimes we get little glimpses of heaven shining through the actions of
God’s saints on earth.

A few days back, Tyler Momsen-Hudson summoned a few of our elders
and friends of Nowell and Jennifer Creadick to Nowell’s bedside
to pray and lay hands on him and to anoint him with oil.

About ten or twelve of us from the church could make it that evening;

Nowell’s family added another four or five to the mix,

and friends from another church brought the total to about 20,
a tight cache of people in a small room.

Some who couldn’t make it at 7:30 that night called to say that they would be praying
for Nowell at that exact time from wherever they might be.

We began by taking turns reading scripture, many voices speaking comfort
from God’s word.

And then, using the beautiful service prepared for us by Cherrie Henry,

I asked everyone to lay hands on a corner of Nowell, or on someone
touching a corner of Nowell, and we prayed silently, together, and then aloud.

And the elders and the friends who couldn’t make it prayed with us.

And the saints tethered just beyond our sight prayed with us.

And the Holy Spirit prayed for Nowell in groans that words could not express.

And then we anointed Nowell with oil, blessed him and let go with our hands.

Now, I’m not a scientist or a neurologist like Eben Alexander,
so I can’t prove that heaven was visible that evening,

but I did feel that a thin place opened up, and that it was palpably near.
And although we removed our hands from Nowell when the prayer
had ended, I don't think God removed God's hand.
Faith, fact, fantasy, fiction, pay your money and take your pick.
I leave you with a poem by Raymond Foss called "Something of Heaven."

Something of Heaven

He reminded us
of a truth too oft' forgotten
faith can afford, offers
a glimpse, a foreshadowing
a foretaste

Something of heaven
can be here with us
out of the dialogue
the hearing of the message
the voice of God
a relationship, a way of life
emboldening us, lifting us
within the realities of earth;
something of heaven here

And let all the saints say: **Amen.**