

# Heaven

Saint Paul's Cathedral, San Diego

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*Gracious God, Let these words be more than words and give us the spirit of Jesus.  
Amen.*

I've been thinking about heaven lately. This comes up partly because Allisyn Thomas and I are taking a group on retreat in June and that's our central topic, and partly because the hope of heaven is one of the central promises of Easter. Easter faith professes that, at the end, we shall rise with Christ and enjoy bliss in God's presence for all eternity.

I was also reminded of the subject of heaven by our readings this morning, especially the latter two. In the Revelation of Saint John the Divine, we're given a glimpse of the New Jerusalem – the old heaven and the old earth have passed away and God and humanity have found their true and everlasting home together. It is the ultimate utopian vision. In the gospel, Jesus, at the Last Supper, reminds his friends that he will be leaving them, going to a place where they cannot go (at least not for the moment). His final directive to them is simple – love one another.

When I talk about heaven I tend to act as if I have some clarity about the topic. But, when pressed, I quickly realize that my thoughts are rather scattered. This, I now understand, is common. The book we're going to use on our retreat is a collection of essays on heaven written by twenty-four different authors. The editor, Roger Ferlo, invited these contributions because he sensed that mainline churches often avoid the subject. He writes, "Heaven is largely ignored by our more serious religious thinkers. Liberal Christians especially tend to stress the 'this-worldliness' of religious faith, seeking to downplay the invidious theology of punishment and reward that so often bedevils Christianity in America... But theologians and preachers who, fearing the worst, avoid the topic of the afterlife end up marginalizing the subject of eternity, leaving thoughts of heaven to popular fiction and the talk shows – or to the punishing rhetoric of pulpit pounding evangelists."

So what do these many authors – "pastors, artists, historians, poets, teachers, therapists, novelists, spiritual guides" – have to say about heaven? Not much, apparently. They are rightly reluctant to get too specific, too descriptive. I'll never forget a Church History professor of mine who, approaching his own death, did so in a spirit of "reverent agnosticism." Those were his exact words. He was reverent, faithful, believing, willing, and he also admitted his ignorance, his blindness, in regard to what might lie ahead. He could not see to the other side and was unwilling to fill in the vacuum with his own yearning. Instead, he bravely walked into his death trusting that the One who created him in the beginning would be waiting for him at the end. That was sufficient.

The writers in Ferlo's book tend to assume the same. They ignore the catechism and church dogma as they strain to catch a glimpse of the hereafter. They more quickly

turn toward analogy and metaphor, believing that delightful and visible things here can point toward even more delightful and invisible things to come. They also frequently return to the theme of loss. It is in the thin place of fear and grief that the consolation of heaven often feels most real.

Peter Hawkins, the Dante scholar, asks, "Does anyone even think of heaven apart from the experience of loss? At least that is how heaven entered my little world at the age of three when, without warning, *she* disappeared. One day, the octogenarian lady who bore my father during the reign of Edward VII – who wore hats with plumage and made the sweetest tea – was suddenly no longer at the door of our apartment at mid-afternoon, ready to pour sugar and play games. Where was she? Something had to be done: I kept asking where she was, kept looking in all the places where she used to go when we played hide-and-seek. The solution was to take me out on the fire escape at nightfall and have me look at the brightest star in the evening firmament. *That's* where she was now, with God, twinkling down her love for me from her new home in heaven. I no longer had to hunt for her in closets or behind the sofa. Anytime I wanted to visit, all I had to do was wait for evening: She was only a star away."

That parental strategy, effective in the moment, gave way over time. As an adult Episcopalian, Hawkins found the language of our prayer book to be lacking in this area, full of vague promise but woefully abstract. That began to change for him during the AIDS crisis of the 80's, as he buried friend after friend, and then his own partner, in his West Village church and heard the hard truth proclaimed time and again: "You are dust, and to dust you shall return." That was oddly comforting; what more, he asked, could be said?

Things turned again for him when his own father fell ill and died. No arrangements had been made so Hawkins asked if a simple Saturday morning service might be dedicated to his memory. During the service he drifted off and fell into something akin to a daydream, perhaps even a vision. "I imagined my father in a casino, gleefully wasting money with a zest I had never once seen in him. A depressed survivor of the Depression, he had always been pathologically careful *not* to spend. Money was to be held on to, saved for a rainy day or perhaps simply to be saved. It was never wasted. But there he was, in the lurid light of a gambling hall – quarters flying, one-armed bandits pumping away – as if there were no tomorrow. He was a very happy man."

The dance rhythm of the spiritual life is a two-step. It's very simple and goes like this – event/interpretation, one/two; something happens and we then inquire into its meaning. The event may occur suddenly; the interpretation could take years. Hawkins takes both steps in relation to this image of his suddenly profligate father. "Maybe this is what happens when you die: the arms of mercy that receive you set you loose in a place where you would not otherwise be caught dead. They bid you do the opposite of what you'd done in life – nudge you to go to the *other* side of the territory you had come to know... Rather than being as comfortable as an old shoe, as satisfying as a long-held dream come true, maybe the afterlife came as a shock. After all, didn't Jesus say at the very end of the Revelation of John, 'Behold, I make all things new?'"