

How the Hope of Heaven Helps Us Now

Revelation 21:-17, John 16:16-22

Easter 5-C, April 24, 2016

Certainly, most everyone knows that **Dr. Martin Luther** was a profoundly **serious student of the Bible**. And yet there are some facets **about Dr. Luther's life and ministry** that remain virtually unknown to many people. One such facet is the tendency that Dr. Luther had, occasionally, to try to rank the various books of the Bible; not so much in terms of their importance, but with respect to how clearly, he believed, each of the various books of the Bible presented the Gospel to their readers; the message of **God's eternal salvation now made available to all people through their faith in Jesus Christ**.

Please don't misunderstand me! Luther had nothing ever but the highest and most-exalted view of the sacred Scriptures! He believed that every Word of the Bible was written under divine inspiration; written by human authors, but by human authors who were in a spirit of deep communion with the Holy Spirit. And Martin Luther loved those words of Paul to Timothy: *"All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent and equipped for every good work" (1 Timothy 3:16)!*

So why did Martin Luther attempt to rank the various books of the Bible?

Luther believed that if you were a person who knew absolutely nothing about the Bible, but wanted to know more about it, that perhaps there would be a much more profitable way for you to approach the Holy Scriptures than for you simply to just sit down and open the Bible to its very first page, and to then begin reading from Genesis 1:1, straight through those 39 book of the Old Testament and 27 book of the New Testament to the very last verse of the Bible in Revelation 22:21 that ends with: "The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you all!"

But if you were to ask Martin Luther where is the best place to go in all of the Bible if you are hoping to contemplate what life would be like with the LORD God almighty and all of his people in eternal glory, that indeed there would be no better place in the Bible for you to look that to the last 2 chapters, Revelation 21 and 22.

Here we can look for ourselves into the very halls and the corridors of heaven—**remembering that the language here is very "picturesque" indeed—to help finite mortal people like you and me, always greatly constricted by those two ever-present realities of space and time—to** somehow now begin to contemplate what the gift of eternal life, to be shared with the eternal God in eternal glory might look like! So John invites us to look into heaven with all of its golden streets and pearly gates, which is no doubt the picture many Christians carry around with them in their heads whenever they might dare to think about heaven and to ponder the reality of it all!

To be with God and his people in eternal glory—is to be in that holy realm and in that sacred sphere where no one will ever die anymore. To be with God and his people in eternal glory—is to live in that sacred realm where no one will ever again **shed any tears of sorrow ever again**.

To be with God and his people in eternal glory—is to be in a place where no one will ever be able to disappoint you ever again; but also a place in which you will never be able to disappoint yourself or other people ever again also!

In heaven, no one will ever suffer any type of physical illness or disease.

Psychological pain and spiritual pain will no longer be able to touch you or harm you either!

For whatever unanswered questions that the book of Revelation may surely present to any one of us, by the time we reach chapter 21 in our epistle lesson today:

(1) All seven of those deadly plagues are now entirely over.

(2) All the trumpets have now been blown.

(3) The archangel Michael has defeated the Dragon and,

(4) By this time the Beast has gone down into the dust.

And behold all that there is now left for us to see—is God’s people in their eternal glory around the throne of God rejoicing; countless numbers of people who are all representatives of every nation and tribe of people that were one time here on earth.

And please note that **God’s depiction of the end times is far different than those that are often given to us by the screen writers in Hollywood**; designed primarily more to heighten people’s anxiety about the end of the world, than it is to comfort them. Here there is no rogue meteor out of control but still a million miles away destined to do us in, nor any indication that the world will end through a nuclear holocaust, with a few privileged people being beamed up from the earth to some type of spaceship that will take them to another planet, like steam escaping a worldwide forest fire.

In John’s vision the New Jerusalem comes down to rest on the same footprints where the old, troubled city once stood, and God comes too!

“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, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away!”

John makes it very clear to us that we are not headed backward to that first, original, perfect paradise for two people, but headed forward to a city for all the nations. When Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden, God did not hang a sign on the front gate that said: “Closed for repairs!”

Instead, if there had been a sign there, the sign would have read: **“Closed for good!” That front gate to the Garden of Eden would have been closed for good, while God the eternal Pragmatist, got busy finding other ways to woe people back to himself, the One who is the Source of all life and light and who longs to give to all those people who would gladly receive it the gift of EVERLASTING LIFE!**

Secondly, please note that there is no temple in this new place of immense glory! **The New Jerusalem doesn’t seem to have even one single church building in it. By then, the need for beautiful places like the place of this lovely church placed here on Lake Murray Boulevard--will be over. There will no longer be any further need for any human beings to serve as mediators between mankind and God—no need for sacred buildings, sacred books, sacred ritual or clergy—for God will be fully present to his people who will be able to now see God face to face.**

Some of you here today might believe that you will greatly miss “going to church,” if what you mean by church is the place where you seek God in response to his previous promise that when two or three are gathered together in the name of Jesus Christ, that this is precisely the place where the Savior will come to us and make his divine presence known to us.

God won’t be hard to find anymore. The whole city will be God’s bride. Wherever you go in it, and whomever you are with, you will be married to God. With a future like that, as much as we enjoy our times of close communion with God in the here and now, the present way we commune with the LORD God Almighty can’t be your be-all-and-end all now. God’s presence is what counts the most!

When God puts that number one core belief deep inside of our hearts and minds that we are even going to transcend our own death, and that with God the best is always yet to come, the Bible teaches us

that the things of this world will begin to greatly lose the immense grasp that they would otherwise have on us! This is what Paul meant when he said to the Galatians one day: *“Far be it from me to glory except for in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world is crucified to me and I to the world!”* (Galatians 6:14).

Other good news for people living in that first century world is that the sea would be no more! Although the sea was one of the greatest natural resources available to humanity, in that so much of their food was retrieved from the sea, and that so many people made their living as commercial fishermen and the like; so many, many people lost their lives at sea, in travel and the like.

Fifthly, these stories about our future life with God in heaven can also convince us that whatever painful, disappointing events or circumstances may surround us here on earth at times these horrendously difficult and challenging times for us are actually only temporary at best!

Seven times in our Gospel lesson this morning, St John is reminding us of those four little words that Jesus shared with his disciples in the Upper Room on the night before he died, and that they admittedly had a most difficult time, at least initially, in grasping! These four little words that are in the text seven times are: “In a little while.”

What is there that can keep believers marching forward in life, fighting the good fight of faith, if you please—when their backs are against the world and everyone else might be telling them to give up? Isn't it above all this sure hope of eternal life that God longs not only to place within every one of us but to also continually strengthen within us when we are gathered together by the Holy Spirit to do the very thing we are doing here again this morning?

But this hope of heaven also gives us a “staying power” in life unlike anything else. The trouble we are enduring will not be lost forever. It's only temporary at best.

This is how Paul voiced it to the Romans one day, *“The sufferings of this present time are hardly worth comparing to all the glory yet to be revealed to us!”*

One day when Paul was recounting for the Corinthians the countless obstacles he had faced in his attempt to take the Gospel to people all around the then known world, he catalogued them quite specifically when he said: *“We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair, persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you”* (2 Corinthians 4:8-12).

But do you know how Paul goes on to refer to all the unjust suffering he had suffered, together with the other apostles for the sake of the Gospel. Paul is so confident of eternal life, he refers to all those events just listed as nothing more than a *“slight momentary affliction”* (2 Corinthians 4:17).

Paul says, *“So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to those things that are not seen! For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are not seen are eternal!”*

Barbara Brown Taylor speaks to us about having Alpha Stories and Omega Stories... that do so much to give us a proper understanding of who we are...

Stories that our parents share with us, our aunts and uncles, and grandparents share with us; our experiences with them do so much to tell us who we are...

When I was 28 years old and first moved to Statesboro, Georgia... “Where are you from?”

I misunderstood, for the longest time, the purpose behind that question, thinking that if I was from there then I must have been perceived as a second-class citizen. What were those newcomers supposed

to say who grew up as children of fathers who served professional careers as members of the Armed Forces, who were always on the move! What could they call home!

Heaven forbid, what if you were born north of the Mason-Dixon line? People in Statesboro, Georgia seemed to always be very proud of calling themselves “Southerners.”

Bumper stickers: “American by birth, Southerner by the Grace of God!”

Wasn't the purpose behind their question at all: Hoping to establish a connection between us.

Where are you from: Daytona Beach. You mean the home of the Daytona Beach 500 Racetrack, “the Birthplace of Speed,” one of the first places where NASCAR came into being?
Beach 17 miles long...

God wants us not only to know who we are with respect to our past, but also with respect to our future! To be able to say and mean it: “I'm but a stranger here, heaven is my home. Earth is a desert drear, heaven is my home! Danger and sorrow stand, round me on every hand. Heaven is my fatherland, Heaven is my home!”

Lady with the fork in her hand: There was a woman who had been diagnosed with a deadly illness and had been given only 3 months to live. Her doctor told her to start making preparations to die. A few days later she contacted her pastor and had him come to her house to discuss certain aspects of what she wanted included in her funeral service. She told him the names of the hymns she wanted sung that day, what Scripture readings she wanted read; even what she would be wearing.

“There's one more thing,” the woman called out to the pastor as he was about to exit her home. “There's one more thing she said to him very excitedly!”

“What's that?” the pastor asked her.

“This is very important! I want to be buried with a fork in my right hand. The pastor stood looking at the woman not knowing quite what to say. “In all my years of attending church socials where food was involved; my favorite part was when whoever was clearing away the dishes from the table would say: ‘Keep your fork!’ It was my favorite part of the meal because I knew that something better was coming. When they told me to keep my fork I knew that something great was about to be given to me: Not simply a bowl of Jell-O or pudding, but something much more tasty and substantial: like a piece of pie that had been baked freshly in the oven; or maybe it was going to be a big piece of Chocolate Cake.

So I want to be buried with a fork in my hand so that when they see me in the casket, when they come through the visitation line, and they ask themselves or others out loud, “What's with the fork?” You can later tell them in the homily.

During his message the pastor told the people of the conversation he had had with this dear lady shortly before she died. He also told them about the fork and about what it symbolized to her. The pastor told the people how he could not stop thinking about the fork and about what is symbolized to her.

The pastor told the people how he could not stop thinking about that fork and told them that they probably would not be able to stop thinking about it—for a while—either!

He was right. So the next time you reach down for your fork, let it remind you oh so gently that there is something better coming.

My prayer, brothers and sisters, is that you will come to see more and more how the hope of heaven helps us now! It gives the strongest sense of personal identity imaginable. We are children of God destined for an eternal life with him in endless glory! Furthermore, the hope of heaven convinces us that the great troubles and problems we go up against in this life will never have the last word for us! They are only temporary at best!” Amen