

## IN LINE AT THE PEARLY GATES

Sermon preached by The Rev. Barbara E. Davis

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Scripture: Genesis 1:1-8, 14-19; Matthew 13:24-33, 44-50

*A cab driver reaches the Pearly Gates and announces his presence to St. Peter, who looks him up in his Big Book. Upon reading the entry for the cabby, St. Peter invites him to grab a silk robe and a golden staff and to proceed into Heaven.*

*A preacher is next in line behind the cabby and has been watching these proceedings with interest. He announces himself to St. Peter. Upon scanning the preacher's entry in the Big Book, St. Peter furrows his brow and says, "Okay, we'll let you in, but take that cloth robe and wooden staff."*

*The preacher is astonished and replies, "But I am a man of the cloth. You gave that cab driver a gold staff and a silk robe. Surely I rate higher than a cabby!" St. Peter responded matter-of-factly: "Here we are interested in results. When you preached, people slept. When the cabby drove his taxi, people prayed."<sup>1</sup>*

I want to encourage you all to stay awake today for the sermon today, which, you might have already guessed, is about heaven. I imagine most of us would say that in our church we don't talk about heaven very much. As Presbyterians we embrace our reformed theology and the conversations we gravitate to help us understand how to live in the world. We do not focus much how to prepare for what comes after this world.

You won't be slathered in fire and brimstone admonishments from the pulpit that tie your earthly deeds to your heavenly reward. In fact, we challenge that strain of theological thinking, confessing that God's grace alone is enough to save us. We might not go forth and "sin boldly" as Martin Luther suggested, but we sin mildly, fairly confident that the Big Book at the Pearly Gates is the creation of Hollywood and comedians.

Most of us would even have to stop and think for a few minutes about where to find images of heaven in the bible or in our Sunday morning worship. With prompting we might come up with Jesus ascending in heaven at the beginning of Acts, which might lead us remembering that part of the Apostles' Creed that says Jesus "sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty." The children among us might remember that the Lord's Prayer says "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." You might know that the book of Revelation contains more references to heaven than any other book in the bible, and you might remember that the prophet Elijah is taken up into heaven on a fiery chariot.

When you hear the story of creation from Genesis, you probably think of paradise, but not necessarily heaven. However, if we listen for it, we hear that heaven is created right along with the earth.

*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And God called the firmament Heaven...And God said, "Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the firmament of the heavens to give light upon the earth." And it was so.<sup>2</sup>*

Those very lights that were created by God to separate day from night are sighted later as witnesses to God's creative power. The idea of heaven being God's dwelling place begins early and remains throughout the biblical narrative. However, it does not take long for God's presence to overflow onto the earth; in Jeremiah the Lord says, "Do I not fill heaven and earth?" (Jeremiah. 23:24)<sup>3</sup> and Solomon in his prayer of dedication for the temple recognizes heaven as God's dwelling place but also that heaven is too small to contain the greatness of God (1 Kings 8:27).<sup>4</sup>

Reaching heaven is certainly desirable, especially given the alternative, but the bible says little about heaven in relation to hell. Heaven is described more on its own terms rather than in contrast to hell. These references, however, leave much to our imagination, and we are still left wondering what it is like.

In first century Judaism, heaven and the resurrection were hotly debated ideas. Jesus had conversations about what heaven is like with the Sadducees, a group of religious leaders who were in conflict with the Pharisees about the merit of the resurrection within Judaism. The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection, and they went to Jesus with this question: *"Teacher, Moses said, 'If a man dies childless, his brother shall marry the widow, and raise up children for his brother.' Now there were seven brothers among us; the first married, and died childless, leaving the widow to his brother. The second did the same, so also the third, down to the seventh. Last of all, the woman herself died. In the resurrection, then, whose wife of the seven will she be? For all of them had married her."*<sup>5</sup>

Jesus' answer is simply that the heaven is not like what we experience on earth, suggesting subtly that there aren't the most relevant questions about heaven. It is a passage that always reminds of a song called, "God Shuffled His Feet" by the band The Crash Test Dummies. The band imagines God resting on the seventh day of creation by designating a day just for picnics with wine and bread. The people who gather sip their wine and ask God questions, like "Do you have to eat or get your hair cut in heaven?"<sup>6</sup>

I was recently reading materials for youth about heaven, which suggested that imagining heaven was "being like the first person to land on Mars and then describing this new world to everyone on Earth."<sup>7</sup> There is no doubt in my mind that the abundance of jokes about heaven and getting into heaven come from this anticipated difficulty of describing what heaven is like. I can't resist another joke. This one gives an example of the kinds of "what will heaven be like" questions that come up.

*Two old men had been best friends for years, and they both lived to the early 90's, when one of them suddenly fell deathly ill. His friend comes to visit him on his deathbed, and they're reminiscing about their long friendship, when the dying man's friend asks, "Listen, when you die, do me a favor. I want to know if there's baseball in heaven."*

*The dying man said, "We've been friends for years, this I'll do for you." And then he dies. A couple of days later, his surviving friend is sleeping when he hears his friend's voice. The voice says, "I've got some good news and some bad news. The good news is that there's baseball in heaven."*

*"What's the bad news?"*

*“You’re pitching on Wednesday.”*<sup>8</sup>

If the question “what will heaven be like” is the first question, the next question is inevitably, “how do I get in?” Getting closer to the presence of God in heaven is one incentive. But heaven, for most of us, is also that place where we would like to be. It is a place about rest and peacefulness. Truth be told, it is a place that looks a lot like what we wish earth was more like. It is a place that is peaceful, restful, pleasant, near to God, where problems are few and easily resolved. A place where there is no sadness or separation.

Even in Jesus’ time, this question “how do I get into heaven” is asked. There was the parable about Lazarus, the poor man, who waited at a rich man’s gate each day, and when Lazarus and the rich man both die, Lazarus went to heaven and the rich man to hell. The rich man appealed to Abraham in heaven if Lazarus might be sent to earth to warn his brothers to change their ways, a request that is denied. Getting into heaven is a one-time opportunity, once you arrive in heaven or hell, there’s no crossing over.

There was the rich man, who came to Jesus wanting to know how to inherit eternal life, as he felt he lacked something despite keeping all the commandments. Jesus told him he needed to sell all his possessions; getting into heaven has an exclusive quality to it, it’s not easy to get in!

Here’s another illustration:

*Mother Theresa died and went to heaven, God greeted her at the Pearly Gates. “Are you hungry, Mother Theresa?” God asked.*

*“I could eat,” Mother Teresa responded.*

*So God opened a can of tuna and reached for a chunk of rye bread and they began to share it. While eating this humble meal, Mother Teresa looked down into Hell and saw the inhabitants devouring huge steaks, lobsters, pheasants, and pastries. Curious, but deeply trusting, she remained quiet.*

*The next day God again invited her to join in a meal. Again, it was tuna and rye bread. Once again, Mother Teresa could see the denizens of Hell enjoying lamb, turkey, venison, and delicious desserts. Still she said nothing.*

*The following day, mealtime arrived and another can of tuna was opened. She couldn’t contain herself any longer. Meekly, she asked, “God, I am grateful to be in heaven with you as a reward for the pious, obedient life I led. But here in heaven all I get to eat is tuna and a piece of rye bread and in the Other Place they eat like emperors and kings! I just don’t understand it...”*

*God sighed, “Let’s be honest Teresa, for just two people it doesn’t pay to cook.”*<sup>9</sup>

The questions and jokes about heaven are endless, but despite our certainty that we won’t ever know exactly what heaven is like, we can’t help but pay closer attention in Matthew’s gospel when Jesus begins this string of parables about the kingdom of heaven.

*The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field.*

*The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed.*

*The kingdom of heaven is like yeast.*

*The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field.*

*The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls.*

*The kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind.*<sup>10</sup>

Not unlike a masterful artist, Jesus takes images one by one and creates a kind of collage of the kingdom of heaven. Whether the listener is a farmer, a fisherperson, or merchant, each has an image of heaven to contribute to the big picture. These parables about the kingdom of heaven remind us that the kingdom of heaven is both about God's action and our human response.

It is no accident that Jesus uses parables to teach about the kingdom of heaven; something so elusive demands that we move away from images that are, as one commentator notes "pedestrian" and "pragmatic," instead challenging the listeners to "tease the mind into reflection and response."<sup>11</sup> These parables, like the multitude of jokes we hear about heaven, are diverse for a reason. If we don't get one, perhaps another one will illuminate another corner of heaven for us. I told these jokes within the sermon today, not to make light of a serious topic, but to help us realize that like Jesus' parables, these jokes help us recognize our own hopes and fears.

We construct the place of heaven with our theology of hope. We hope, even when we don't believe, that there is a significant space or even a real place that, although drawn from our human experience, lies far beyond our human experience. We hope, even when we don't believe, that heaven is paradise. And perhaps that is why, despite our hope that heaven exists and we will one day arrive at its gates, we can still laugh about how hard it will be to get in, or how annoyed we will be standing in line waiting to get in, or how as much as we long for it, we don't want to arrive too soon. For the truth is, our curiosity about heaven is not just about the afterlife, but is deeply connected to our hope for a little bit of heaven on earth. We long for the rest and comfort heaven promises, we long for a way to catapult over our human experience to that place beyond.

Jesus' use of earthly imagery to describe the kingdom of heaven is a way of allowing our mind to lodge in that hope. The kingdom of heaven in Matthew's Gospel is not some up in the sky place that comes at the end of long life. The kingdom of heaven is equal to the kingdom of God, it is a way of talking about the ways human existence on earth can flourish and grow with God's vision.

Recently, the band Coldplay released a song called "42" which has the catching and relevant refrain: "You didn't get to heaven but you made it close."<sup>12</sup> Perhaps that sentiment is exactly what is needed to really answer our questions about the kingdom of heaven. We might not break through the Pearly Gates to wear a silk robe, or pitch on Wednesday, or so God and Mother Teresa can share more than tuna and rye bread. We might not get to create heaven on earth, but we can work to make it close.

<sup>1</sup> [www.jokesaboutheaven.com](http://www.jokesaboutheaven.com)

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 1:1, 8a, 14-15 Revised Standard Version

<sup>3</sup> “Heaven” by Thomas Francis Glasson in The Oxford Companion to the Bible, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan. (Oxford University Press, New York, NY: 1993), p. 270-271.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 22:24-28 (NRSV).

<sup>6</sup> “God Shuffled His Feet” on God Shuffled His Feet by *The Crash Test Dummies* (1993).

<sup>7</sup> “Imagining Heaven” by Adam Fischer, The Thoughtful Christian (2009).

<sup>8</sup> [www.jokesaboutheaven.com](http://www.jokesaboutheaven.com)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Selections from Matthew 13:24-33, 44-50.

<sup>11</sup> Hare, Douglas R. A. Matthew in Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (John Knox Press: Louisville, KY: 1993), 156.

<sup>12</sup> Berryman, Guy Rupert; Buckland, Jonathan Mark; Champion, Will; Martin, Christopher A J, “42” on Viva La Vida or Death and All His Friends by *Coldplay* (Universal, 2008).