

Beyond all we ask or think (Rev 21:9-27)

A Sermon for All Saints Day or any Sunday at the end of the church year.

(This is the Festival of All Saints, All Souls Day.) What we ask as we look at the text is: What happens? Not only what happens to all those who have gone before, but what happens to you and me? There are all kinds of things people think happen. Some think that in heaven people sit around on little clouds and conclude: "That's boring I'd rather go to the other place." Or some think we are merely thoughts in the mind of God. How old would you be in heaven? Someone has speculated that everyone would be age 41. Of course, that's all speculation, nonsense. There is a lot of stuff from other religions, as well as from biblical matter, caught up in fantasy and imagination.

One such thing is purgatory. There is no purgatory mentioned in the New Testament. (The Roman Catholic Church uses 2 Maccabees 12:38-46.) There is, however, a series of images of the status of those in an intermediate state. One is in Luke 16:22, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. After death Lazarus was in Abraham's bosom. What does that mean? It means something about comfort and security, but it doesn't say anything more than that. Or it says Revelation 6:9: The saints are "under the altar." That's a place where God dwells but what else? Paul often uses the image of "sleep" and "sleep in the Lord." Colossians 3:3: "For you have died and your life is hid with Christ in God." We are hidden in Christ.

Most of all we need to remember that time is something in us, not in God. Therefore all this speculation about how much time between death and the end is really a problem of our thinking and not with him.

People think about heaven, what that's like, and we think mostly of continuing what's here. In the Old and New Testaments that's pictured as a wedding banquet because it's the greatest thing that they knew of. The future is to be forever in this banquet with the Lord. Most people are familiar with Dante's *Divine Comedy*, where he talks not only of hell but about heaven. He has nine levels of heaven. Of course, all that is simply speculation. People think there have to be rewards and different degrees of punishment.¹ We get caught up basically in thinking that it has something to do with good works.

A famous German, Hermann Gunkel, pointed that Jews and Christians think of the end time as being a repetition of the beginning, so they asked themselves what was it like in the Garden of Eden. It says in Genesis 9:3 that finally God allowed people to eat meat. The implication is that at the beginning they were vegetarians.

¹ "Rewards, But in a Very Different Sense," *Justification by Faith. Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue 7*. Eds. H. George Anderson, T. Austin Murphy, Joseph A. Burgess (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985) 94-110.

In Isaiah 11:6-9 and 65:25 there is speculation about the new Eden. In Isaiah 11: "The wolf shall lie down with the lamb and the leopard lie down with the kid." Then in Isaiah 65: "The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox." No longer is nature "red in tooth and claw" (Tennyson). As you may know, you can have a vegetarian diet for dogs, but cats, like lions, have to have either fish or meat. They are made that way. And yet in this restored Eden they thought there must be a way of getting beyond all suffering and death. In Revelation 21:4 there will be "no more crying and no more dying." And "the lion shall eat straw like the ox" (Isaiah 11:7).

C.S. Lewis wrote a book, an imaginary voyage that has the unfortunate title, *The Great Divorce*, not about marriage, but it has to do with a voyage that somebody in an imaginary way takes to heaven. Everything there is clearer and brighter and heavier; the idea is that heaven is more real than anything we can imagine and think of. But that's not really what the biblical witness is about.

The Book of Revelation is a kind of apocalyptic fantasy about the end. In Revelation 4 there is a dramatic picture of the great court of the king or emperor. There's the throne and the twenty-four elders, the seven spirits, and the four animals. In Revelation 21 there is another dramatic picture, an image of the New Jerusalem. It even gives dimensions. It's a cube, 1,500 miles on a side with the twelve foundations and twelve gates. Each gate has a jewel. Two things are notable here. One is: The jewels and the sequence of the jewels is exactly like the sequence of the signs of the Zodiac in the ancient religion of astrology but in reverse to show that that the Lord is now in control. And two: There is no sun or moon; there is no night because the Lord is there, and he is the light.

The key to all of this is found in the great resurrection chapter, 1 Corinthians 15. There is a whole section on life in the future, but it is summed up for us in verse 50: "Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable." That is the end of a long section, and it goes on to the end of the chapter. Basically what is at stake is there is nothing in us, because we are flesh and blood, that has any claim to continuity or immortality. We're caught with Greek thinking which is not biblical, which says we have something called a soul. It is really based on a mistranslation of Genesis 2:7, which says God took some dust and created Adam, and as it says in the King James Version: "He became a living soul." But actually what it means is that he became a "warm body." He became alive rather than just a thing, a material thing.

We have in our heads that there is something in us, a divine spark. There is also "the image of God" (Gen 1:27-28—to have a task). In Colossians 3:10 it says that "the image of God" is restored in Christ. We have the idea that there is a "me-ness" and this "me" has to be forever, has to be that which continues. And that's not what it says.

What does I Corinthians 15:50 say? It says "flesh and blood" cannot inherit the kingdom of God. In Hebrews 2:14 it says: "He partook of the same nature that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil." That is, there is a break, a total break between good and evil. In 2 Cor 5:17-18: "If any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come." He creates something new. Something which is not of the old, which is of death and dying and crying.

What we have to do is go back to basic Christian understanding and faith. That means going back to who God is and what our hope is, for we do have, as it says in 1 Peter 1:3: "a living hope." That gives us great confidence. What is our "living hope"? The living hope is based on the fact that we have God's promise. His promise. His word, which does not fail, is in Jesus Christ.

In order to see this easily we go back to Romans 4 where Paul is talking about Abraham. He says: Remember Abraham and Sarah, when they were about one hundred years old, and they thought we will never have an heir, and they had a son, Isaac. God can do that. Then he says in Romans 4:17: "He created out of nothing." He creates with his Word and he creates out of nothing. Then he says in Romans 4:5: Most of all, he can "justify the ungodly," which is what we are. It is comparatively a very small thing that he creates life out of death in the resurrection.

What does that mean for you and me in the concrete now and in the future? In the concrete now it means he creates something new. Where is that? Because we ask: What about those who have died? And what about me? What is the basis we have? The basis we have is that he has made us his own by giving us the Holy Spirit in Baptism. It says in Romans 8:11: "The Spirit is the one who makes alive." We have that through the Baptism he gives and does for us.

Where is that now? There are three images that we have in Paul. The one that is quite fascinating and somewhat difficult to translate is in 2 Cor 1:22: "He has put his seal upon us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee," and 2 Cor 5:5: "God has given us his Spirit as a guarantee." The best translation is "pawn ticket." At a pawn shop you bring something, you get money for it and pay interest on the time, but it's still yours for a certain amount of time if you pay the original sum plus interest. It's still yours, but what you have is a piece of paper. The translators also use down payment.

Another picture is that of being an heir. It says you have eternal life in me. But that, as it says in Romans 8:17-18, is as the heir which isn't now in one sense but is guaranteed through the Holy Spirit who makes us alive (Rom 8:11). That's what God does.

We also have the picture of "the first fruits" (Rom 8:23). There will be "no more crying and no more dying" (Rev 21:4). It's different, but it is already now. That's for you and me now.

But what then of that forever? After this short life is over? Not the kind of speculation that people find in the common press and in other religions. There are some significant verses that pertain as people struggle with the future. One of them is in 2 Cor 6:16: "The Lord says, 'I will live with them and move among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.'" Or in Philippians 3:21: "He will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power which enables him to subject all things to himself." Or in 1 John 3:2: "It does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."

Therefore there is something concrete. The word that is used is "body," but that doesn't mean "matter." It means there's a "reality." A real reality. Not flimsy spiritual stuff in the future. (Paul uses the words "body" and "soul" variously. I Cor 7:34, 1 Thess 5:23.)

Finally, what is our hope? First of all, in Romans 8:32: "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, will he not give us all things with him?" We can add the word "good" here. "Will he not give us all good things with him?"

Then also Ephesians 3:20 in the KJV: "exceedingly abundantly beyond all that we ask or think."

And in Luke 6:38: "pushed down, shaken together, and running over."

And most of all in 1 Cor 2:9 where Paul is directly speaking to us: "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has entered into the heart of anyone, what God has prepared for those who love him."

It is beyond anything we ask or think, because he is the one who creates us anew in him, forever. Amen.