

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, November 2, 2008
Rev. John Tapscott

"A LOOK INTO HEAVEN"

Revelation 7:9-17

In the Book of Revelation God gave John, an exiled and persecuted Christian, a dramatic vision of the final clash between God and evil. And the vivid symbolic language in which this clash is recorded is almost too much to take except for two things. One is the final scene of God's complete victory over the evil one with a vision of the new Jerusalem in which there is healing for the nations and peace for God's creation and God's people. The other thing that makes Revelation bearable is that God provided John some rest stops along the way, glimpses into the future which remind the reader who is in charge and how it will all end. The reading today is one of those rest stops. God gave John a look into heaven. And through John God has given it to us, for John faithfully recorded all that he saw. It begins in verse 9, "After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count..."

It's sometimes good for us to think about heaven. We don't that too often, actually. Perhaps mention of heaven reminds us of our own mortality. Or perhaps because it's in the future we don't have time to think about it now. We are practical people and don't want to be like Christians who were accused of "being so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good." Now the Bible mentions heaven quite often without going into too many details. Regarding heaven Jesus says, "In my Father's house are many rooms. I go to prepare a place for you." And Jesus spoke often about the Kingdom of Heaven, and what that would be like if it were lived out on earth.

Children often think more about heaven than adults. A grandmother tells about taking her grandson to a theme park and riding the sky lift. The cable car was crowded that day and the little lad could not see out. Half way up he tugged hard on his grandmother's hand and said in a loud voice. "Grandma, is this what we'll ride in when we go up to heaven?" The whole cable car filled with laughter and when they reached the top and got off everybody wanted to meet "this little man who's going to heaven."

A counsellor by the name of Ted Menten works with terminally ill children, giving great support to the dying child and their family. Ted tells that one day he was talking to a group of children about heaven. One little girl, Sharon,

declared that, instead of an angel as a guide, she wanted Lassie to come and lead her to heaven. When some of the boys laughed Sharon said she wanted a dog because "Lassie always knows how to get back home."

And there was one little lad who had a new baby sister. One day he went into her bedroom and sat down beside her crib. And over the monitor the parents heard the boy saying to his little sister, "Please tell me about heaven. I'm beginning to forget."

It's easy to forget about heaven. So a look into heaven is necessary and useful. It is not escapism, as some think. A look into heaven shapes our living here and now. It gives direction to the church's mission and to our personal lives. A look into heaven shapes our life on earth. And here's what happens as we take a look into heaven, as God revealed it to John.

First, it gives us confidence in the Gospel message. Verse 9 "After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands."

Today is All Saints - the Sunday when we recall the saints who have gone before us into heaven. According to the Bible a saint is not some super-Christian. All who have faith in Jesus and follow him are saints according to Scripture. And in that great multitude in heaven we see the faces of dear family members who have gone before us. We see the faces of saints of this congregation. We know their names. We miss them, but we are grateful for their love, their influence, their service. And as part of the great cloud of witnesses they are still praying for us and encouraging us. As we celebrate Holy Communion today, they are very near to us and we to them, for here at this table is the Communion of saints.

When we look into heaven we see a great multitude - from every nation, every tribe, people, language. The Gospel is for all. And it works. Now we can't say salvation is universal, that everyone makes it at the end, for the Gospel requires us to make a decision for Christ, and there may be some who resist doing that, even to the very end. But many do make that decision, and the Gospel results in a great harvest of souls for God's Kingdom. And all in that multitude know that they are there for one reason. It's not because of what they've done; it's because of what God has done in Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who lived and died and rose again to take away the sins of the world and open heaven's door. Verse 10 - "They cried out in a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God and to the Lamb." That's the Gospel - God's great love

poured out in Jesus Christ saving sinners from an eternity apart from God and bringing us to eternal life with God and all His people.

Now God is the final judge of people's hearts and how they have responded to his searching, saving grace. God does not give up easily on pursuing people. We can't predict how or when God will enter someone's heart and stir up faith. In lands where the Gospel is banned people have even reported Jesus appearing to them coming to them in their dreams. God has his ways. What I know is that this look into heaven shows that the Gospel works. We can have confidence in the message. So the church proclaims the Gospel to the very ends of the earth.

I remember Rick Warren of the Purpose Driven Life saying that when his father, a preacher in small churches all his life, was close to death, he suddenly sat straight up in bed, grabbed his Bible from the night stand and said, "One more for Jesus. I've got to win one more for Jesus."

A look into heaven gives us confidence in the Gospel. And by our own faith in Jesus Christ we will join that great multitude one day.

Secondly, a look into heaven gives us hope in the time of trial. Verse 13: "One of the elders addressed me saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where do they come from?" I said to him, "Sir, you know." Then he said to me, "They have come out of the great ordeal..." Some in the great multitude were martyrs, people who had come out of the persecution that was happening in John's time, or perhaps the persecution at the end of time.

Now we are not like those who lost their heads for confessing Jesus as Lord, but these are trying times for Christians. It is becoming increasingly difficult to be a committed follower of Jesus. The world doesn't understand our faith or the Christian perspective. In fact, the world rejects it and those who hold it. Many in the world pay a high price for their allegiance to Christ.

But in general these are trying times, uncertain times. The world is going through many ordeals. I sometimes think that whoever loses the Presidential election on Tuesday will be the real winner. Who would want the job in these times? On a personal level I know many of us are going through difficult trials. But a look into heaven shows us that God's people do come out of the ordeal victoriously. And we don't have to win the victory ourselves, not do we have to wait until heaven for it. The victory is Christ's, and he shares it with us. Whatever earthly trial you are going through now, you can be sure that by God's grace you will emerge. And even in the midst of the ordeal Christ gives us His strength. So we can stand firm. We can take courage. Looking into

heaven gives us hope in the time of trial.

Finally, a look into heaven shapes the church's mission on earth. This rest stop ends in chapter 7, verses 16 and 17, "They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd and he will guide them to streams of living water and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

This is God's ministry in heaven, and it's what the church does now on earth in imitation of God. The church provides spiritual shelter for people. It often helps to provide physical shelter as well, so that people are protected from scorching heat and bitter cold. We act to relieve people's physical hunger and thirst. We lead people to the springs of living water for their souls found in Jesus Christ. The church brings comfort and hope, and helps to wipe away people's tears. God will finally bring this work to fulfilment, but under the Lordship of Jesus and with the help of the Holy Spirit the church brings a bit of heaven to earth right now. A look into heaven gives direction to the church's mission on earth.

A pastor was called to the bedside of a man who was very ill. "Pastor," said the man, "I know I'm going to die, but I'm not afraid. As I pass through the valley of the shadow of death, the One who has led me all through life will be with me; and I shall dwell with Him forever." As he spoke tears began to flow down his cheek. The minister took a kleenex and gently put it to the man's face. He responded, "Thank you, Pastor. The next time tears are wiped from my eyes, God himself will do it!"

"After this I looked and there was a great multitude no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and people and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white with palm branches in their hands...and the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

A look into heaven shapes our life here on earth, so that even now we join with the saints around the heavenly throne and sing, "Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God forever and ever. Amen!"

