

“A Vision of Heaven”

Revelation 21:1-6a

In June, 1917, a poem by an anonymous author appeared in the *Hobo News* of St. Louis, Missouri. Called “The Hobo’s Last Lament,” it relates the last words of one of those princes of the open road who was dying as he lay stretched out inside an empty boxcar on a railroad siding.

A fellow hobo is solemnly listening in. He hears his friend utter these words:

*I'm going to a better land,
Where everything is bright,
Where beef-stews grow on bushes
And you sleep out every night;
And you do not have to work at all,
And never change your socks,
And streams of goodly whisky
Come trickling down the rocks.*

The dying man has a message for his fellow wanderers. Don’t weep for him, he says. A train is coming: “A fast freight.” He intends to ride it to “a better land, where they hate the word called work”:

*Hark, I hear her whistling,
I must catch her on the fly;
I would like one scoop of beer*

*Once more before I die.
The hobo stopped, his head fell back,
He'd sung his last refrain;
His old pal stole his coat and hat
And caught an East-bound train.*

So, what *is* heaven like? Surely it's a question that's occurred to all of us.

Heaven. Is it, as the fictional hobo imagined, a place of plentiful beef stew and open-air fountains of whisky and "a better land where they hate the word called work"?

Or does it conform more closely to the vision of John in the book of Revelation? Later in chapter 21 just beyond the passage that is today's lesson —

John describes the 12 gates to heaven. "And the twelve gates are twelve pearls, each of the gates is a single pearl, and the street of the city is pure gold, transparent as glass"

You've heard of "the pearly gates"? This verse is the source of that image. Many old-timers will remember a song that still can be found in many hymnals: "He the Pearly Gates Will Open."

The refrain goes like this:

*He the pearly gates will open,
So that I may enter in;
For he purchased my redemption
And forgave me all my sin.*

It's not like all those cartoons you see in which Saint Peter's at his desk, quill pen in hand, leaning low over the Book of Life, guarding a couple of wrought-iron gates. Or as a marine told

me at a recent graveside service that he believes marines will be guarding the gates to heaven, deciding who gets in. He was serious.

No, John's image of the gates of heaven is nothing like that. Each of the 12 gates is a single pearl of immense size. (Is there a passageway cut through the middle of each pearl, or does that giant translucent gem somehow swing aside to allow the souls of the blessed to pass? John is not clear about the finer details.)

You've heard of "streets of gold"? This is where you find that image as well. But this is no earthly gold. The gold of heaven's streets and boulevards is of such astonishing purity that it's "transparent as glass." How can that be?

But this is, after all, heaven. So we can hardly expect it to conform to the physical laws of earth.

Yet, the vision of Revelation 21 is not about some distant heaven. The golden city with its gates of pearl does not exist in some far-off realm, on a higher spiritual plane. John's triumphant vision is of heaven come to earth! The city comes "down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (v. 2).

By the grace of God, the day will finally come when we need not make a spectacular leap to celestial heights. On that great, glorious day, *heaven will come to us*.

With all of our present day problems with carbon and plastics pollution, with drug and alcohol addictions, with not making it with minimum wage jobs, with increasing mental illness

and rising health insurance costs, with wars going on for 10 and 20 years, some say that this life is a “living hell,” that we are living in hell right now.

So “heaven on earth” is the stuff of our imaginations, the stuff of our dreams and visions, the stuff of our spiritual yearnings. When people use the phrase “heaven on earth”, they’re trying to envision the most perfect earthly reality they can imagine.

I envision the waterfalls in Yosemite, looking out 20 miles from a mountain top in Colorado, the vista of red rock buttes in Sedona, and especially the beaches of Florida.

I find it interesting that some millennials, our children’s generation, who have been living in cities with high paying and high stress jobs, are buying homes in rural areas. When they spend most of their work and leisure time alone with a computer, they’re realizing they might as well do it in the countryside where housing is way cheaper and the air is cleaner.

So when we imagine heaven come to earth, it’s usually not a heavenly vision at all. Rather it’s an earthly vision of a beautiful mountaintop or beach or house in the country that helps make all the negative stuff around us seem more tolerable.

C.S. Lewis casts a different vision. In his novel *The Last Battle*, part of the *Chronicles of Narnia* series, Lewis allows his characters to glimpse heaven from a different perspective.

The victorious lion-king Aslan (Jesus) has triumphed over the forces of evil, but the land of Narnia has been destroyed. The Pevensie children join a host of virtuous humans and animals as they journey across a lovely landscape of grassy fields following Aslan, who has invited them to follow, but who is now so far ahead they can no longer see him.

They notice something wondrously strange about the place. It resembles the familiar landscape of Narnia, and yet it's not Narnia.

“Those hills,” said Lucy, “the nice woody ones and the blue ones behind — aren't they very like the Southern border of Narnia?”

“Like!” cried Edmund after a moment's silence. “Why, they're exactly like. Look, there's Mount Pire with his forked head, and there's the pass into Archenland and everything!”

“And yet they're not like,” said Lucy. “They're different. They have more colors on them and they look farther away than I remembered and they're more ... more ... oh, I don't know ...”

“More like the real thing,” said the Lord Digory softly.

Lewis' advice to us, communicated through the characters of this beloved tale, is to look for signs of heaven come to earth. They are all around us for the discerning spiritual eye to discover. We just may be lucky — or blessed — enough to glimpse them, imbedded in the daily routine of life, harbingers of greater glories yet to come. Certainly Divinity is being blessed with new members who will join with us in glimpses of heaven through our many Divinity ministries.

“Christ Is Alive!,” a beloved modern Easter hymn by Brian Wren, captures such wonder in this stanza: “Not throned above, remotely high, / untouched, unmoved by human pains, / but daily, in the midst of life, / our Savior with the Father reigns.”

If we are so blessed as to catch even a fleeting glimpse of such glory, our lives can never be the same again.

The hobo might hear the whistle of the Gloryland Express and dream of beef stew and whiskey, and I may still believe the mountains and beaches are a little slice of heaven on earth. We, too, may carry within our hearts a hope and longing for a world quite unlike the one we inhabit.

The good news is that when Jesus died on that cross and rose again, we know that the transformation of this earth and all of us has already begun.

May the peace of God . . .

#389 – Christ is Alive! Let Christians Sing