

## Heaven in a Day

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**Scripture:** from Psalm 90, v. 12. "Teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart."

Matthew 13:44 "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it."

This morning, we began with the end. Did you notice? Our responsive reading this morning is one of my most favorite benedictions to offer you at the end of a worship service.

" God go with you, may God walk where you walk, guide where you must make choices, comfort where you hurt and surprise you by God's continued love for you, and what you are, and what you do."

It was written by the Rev. Dr. Robert G. Kemper, who was a mentor and the senior minister of the church I grew up in. He would say this benediction every Sunday. For me, it was as important to hear his voice and these words at the end of the service as it is for us to sing the Alleluia. To me, it is a perfect benediction.

You might also have noticed that the readings we heard this morning; particularly at the beginning of the service, are all readings that we have used these past few years at the different memorial services we have offered for friends and members of this church. Sometimes it is a good reminder for us to know that these earthly days won't last forever, and that sometimes it is good to make an accounting of your spiritual stock.

Four weeks ago yesterday the third and most likely last child for my family was born. Little Remy Raye came into this world to the delight of Tracy and me, as well as her older siblings, Judah and Stella. She was a surprise from the beginning, as Tracy was adamant that this child she had been carrying was most definitely a boy. She is a wonderful blessing to us. There is something different about this third child. For one thing, we as parents don't quite freak out about things like we did with Judah and Stella. Now we take a little extra time to look her over and wrap her up; already the changes are noticeable; with little semi-grins and eye contact where before there was almost none. She is starting to recognize her sibling's voices which they love, and it feels like all of us are marking the moments of discovery as we welcome this new human blob of need to our fold.

One week after Remy was born, I went off to St. Augustine to perform the memorial service for an old family friend; a woman whose kindness and generosity were instrumental in my life. Her name was JoAnn Lohman. She was the woman who opened up her home to me on Crescent Beach many years ago, before I went to seminary, to live for a few months in the beautiful ocean-side town of St. Augustine. It was through that time spent at that place where I met the woman who was to become my wife. And I owe it all to her and her husband.

As you can probably imagine, I've been thinking a lot about life and death lately. To have the two perfect bookends so close together has provided me with some pretty cosmic thinking patterns. Whenever major life changes or new occurrences happen, I do believe that the veil between the heavens and the earth are exceptionally thin. At these times it is not uncommon for us to do more reflection and contemplation on the grand theme of this life, ponder the mighty question, "What does it all mean?"

I like the Buddhist thought offered at the beginning of this service,

"The Perfect Way is only difficult for those who pick and choose. Do not like, do not dislike: all then will be clear.

Let the differences go and Heaven and Earth shall be one."

I suppose if I wanted to get Theo-budhist-ical, I'd say, "when we can release the ego, let go of our needs for emotional and intellectual sustenance and encouragement, then the Perfect Way will be made clear." But I'm not a theological Buddhist. But I have found truth in this statement, and statements like it when I've lived for a while in those thin veil moments.

Holding Remy in my arms, and releasing the New Yorker article or the highlights from last night's baseball game, there is no like and no dislike. There is simply a little baby breathing in my arms; with perfect lips and eyes; warm and gentle, softly sleeping. There are no choices in moments like these. There is no bad or good. There is simply this moment, and this moment is perfect. Heaven and earth are one.

In a similar way, when I arrived at our family friends' home on Crescent, to meet with the family and talk about the life of the departed and plan her memorial service, I had to take a moment and gaze out at the crashing waves, the stretch of beaches, and the beautiful sky. I remembered the moments of gazing out at the ocean, and it felt almost as if each moment I had spent staring at this same spacious view were all rolled into this moment, this NOW and the feeling was a peaceful remembrance.

Ann Patchett wrote a piece in the New York Times last May that I kept for this sermon. In the article, she speaks a bit about what it's like to be a writer on parade. It sounds like it is a pretty constant self-promotion tour, with quick stops in small towns to do short readings and promote new books. In the article she relays the story of the first time she stumbled in to a little town just south of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan called "Petoskey." She describes it, "the houses were wide of porch and steep of gable, many of them painted in the colors favored by seventh grade girls. Petunias dangled from window boxes. Below the town the sun spread its diamond light over Lake Michigan, over the boats and the swimmers and the shore. The small downtown was a throwback to some simpler idea of American vacations, a couple of ice cream stores that sold taffy and fudge, a gift shop with T-shirts in the window that said LAKE. Imagine the cast of "Mad Men" driving out to Michigan in wood-paneled station wagons for the summer. The world was leafy and dappled, quiet and cool. Within 10 minutes I started to wonder how I could spend the rest of my life in Petoskey."

Ann Patchett, as is wont of her trade, is also a connoisseur of the Independent Bookstore. And in Petoskey, she believes she has found THE ideal. A small shop named McLean and Eakin, where, she says, "the books

are arranged to beckon, and there are plenty of big chairs to fall into once you heed their call. It is the kind of store where I could happily spend a summer.” This is, she says, her own personal idea of heaven.

This story gave me some good insight into our Biblical readings for today. AS we set out in this theme to flesh out the ideas of what heaven might be like, or what a new earth even means, I turned to the red-letter readings of Jesus, to hear what he had to say on the matter. By now in this theme you know that our images of Pearly gates and gold paved streets with angelic neighbors come from John of Patmos in Revelation. You also know that Jesus describes WHO will receive good things in heaven more often than he actually describes WHAT heaven is like.

But there, nestled into Matthew’s gospel, are a few quick parable stories that supposedly describe heaven. Remember now, these are parables; meaning they are overstuffed metaphors meant to bring insight through imagination. But even these can seem a bit cryptic:

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.”

On first reading, this parable made almost no sense to me. A treasure in a field? So the person goes and buys the field? What is heavenly about that?

These parables didn’t make any sense to me, UNTIL I went for a walk through the Gainesville Greenway in the week between Remy’s new life, and JoAnne’s recent death.

I had never walked this particular greenway before. It’s the one that goes south from 8<sup>th</sup> avenue across from Westside Park. And walking through these woods, it’s hard not to feel at peace. You can actually hear the birds before the cars, and there is a beautiful forest and meandering creek to take your mind away from the city streets. On my return home, I decided on a whim to take one of the numerous little side paths into the woods, just to see where it might lead. And after stumbling through the thicker brush for a while, I was suddenly kicked out onto a breath-taking view. The forest gave way to the creek, and the creek comes to a sharp turn, leaving two sides of sandy banks exposed, with the forest pressing in on either side. It was one of those mystical moments, and I had to sit down and try to take it in.

That’s when Jesus parable came clear to me. This moment, this space and this time seemed eternal. It was one of those moments in life where nothing else mattered; clocks stop and to-do lists fade away. Aches and pains disappear and life settles into a symbiotic rhythm where everything around me, everything inside of me breathes in the splendor of God’s creation, and the presence of heaven is undeniable.

That must be what the merchant feels at that moment where his life’s passion becomes encapsulated in this one perfect pearl. Nothing else matters; in this pearl the merchant has found perfection.

I prefer the image of the treasure in the field. If I could, I would sell all I owned to purchase this little twist of creek plot; because it will forever remind me of heaven.

One of the challenges of interjecting our modern visions of heaven onto ancient theologies is that our worlds and world views are so completely different that they can be almost too far apart to relate. It seems pretty obvious that Jesus believed that it is THIS life that matters, and not the next. It's what we do in the here and now that will dictate what our eternity might look like. By using parables to describe the kingdom of heaven, Jesus invites us into a place of imagination, and discovery. He doesn't teach what the place looks like, he offers images and visions that speak to us, and that reveal realities that we can relate to. What matters is OUR response to the discovery.

The kingdom of heaven, some have argued, already exists on earth, as it does in heaven. It is available right here and now. That is what I believe Jesus is teaching us in these parables. . This was the thought of the early Christian church, about 200 years after the death of Jesus. They figured he was coming back to deliver all believers, but after a few generations had passed, they figured they'd better come up with a new vision. They are the ones who reframed the question of heaven, away from an "up there" place to a place right here on earth, transformed into a world of grace and possibility through the death and resurrection of God's son. These early ideas prompted the first monastic communities to take to the desert; in search of that thin place where heaven and earth coincide.

This idea is echoed in J D. Salinger's "Franny and Zooey", when young brother Zooey reminds his penitent older sister that, "Jesus knew that we're carrying the Kingdom of Heaven around with us, inside, where we're all too stupid and sentimental and unimaginative to look."

But what if we weren't? What if we were capable of recognizing that this is the moment, and this is the place where eternity exists? This is our salvation; present in the bundle of a baby, in the crashing of the waves, in the warm embrace of an overstuffed chair in a Michigan bookshop. Where does the tick-tock stop for you? Are you imaginative enough to recognize that this is the heaven that Jesus was talking about? Are you able, like Dr. Kemper's benediction asks, to let God SURPRISE you? What a blessing! What a gift to know that you can reach heaven in a day; and you can still make it home for supper.

Amen.