

Our Enduring Fascination with the Afterlife
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The United Church of Gainesville
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Revelation 21:1-6

Think of how different all our visions of heaven are. The buzzing energy of all the notions you shared in only a sentence or two with each other in the beginning of this service must have either given God a headache or about two hundred new ideas. I read about heaven all summer, and I'll be sharing thoughts from three books and of course my own thoughts as well. Lisa Miller, in her new book, Heaven – Our Enduring Fascination with the Afterlife (as you can see, she stole my sermon title!) says that according to the 2007 Gallup poll, 81 percent of Americans believe in heaven, and it seems that there are about as many ideas on heaven as there are people with ideas. She believes that the less that ministers preach and speak about life after death, the more that popular books and opinions of varying quality spring up. Evidently, ministers don't preach much on heaven these days.

To counter the spread of even more tacky, whacky, and mediocre books, articles and ideas on heaven, we have this new worship theme of "A New Heaven and a New Earth: Not Necessarily in that Order." Sandy, Vince, Andy and I will be covering a lot of perspectives so that by the end of this theme you will have experienced a thoughtful variety of approaches to eternity both here and in the hereafter.

Using Lisa Miller's book, I'm going to start with something of a survey, a kind of history of heaven 101. Once upon a biblical time there was not really a concept of heaven and hell as places where we all go after we die. In early bible times, it was thought that the earth was flat, surrounded by water above and below. Covering the earth was the dome of the sky. When it rained, that dome opened up letting the water in. Springs result from that under the earth water breaking through the earth's crust. If you read the account of the great flood in Genesis you'll see this point of view. It begins by saying that the great deep burst forth from below and the windows of the heavens were opened.

The firmament above was heaven, and only God lived in heaven, with perhaps some angels. The concept of heaven as a place where people went when they died didn't begin until about two hundred years before the Common Era, the time of Christ, in late biblical Judaism.

By the time of Jesus the nature of heaven was a matter of significant debate in Judaism. The Sadducees, for example, didn't believe in it, and asked Jesus the quite rational question of whom you would be married to in heaven if you had been married to more than one person on earth. Jesus responded that in heaven you'd be like the angels who

didn't marry. I doubt if this impressed the Sadducees who didn't believe in angels either, but that's a sign of the conundrums that heaven causes.

Hell is first referred to in Judaism as Gehenna, the name of the garbage dump outside the city that was always on fire.

Hell as a place of eternal punishment developed with clarity during the Middle Ages when the church, in alliance with Kings and Emperors, needed to keep the population in line. Thus medieval cathedrals are filled with paintings of the sufferings and torments of hell which have little biblical basis.

Visions of eternity change with the human conditions of different eras. For example, during the American Civil war, 620,000 young men died, 2 percent of the American population. At the time most preachers were offering heaven as a bright, beautiful, and brilliantly lit place, but not one with much human contact. This gave little comfort to those many people who had lost their loved ones in the war. The popular writer, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps published her vision of heaven, Gates Ajar which describes heaven as a place of utter beauty where most importantly we join our loved ones in wonderful meals and candlelight conversations. It was a best seller surpassed only by Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin, and the Bible.

This notion of heaven as a place of reunion was reinforced at that same time with writings of an eighteenth century Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg. He believed that in death people were sorted not according to good and evil, but according to common interests. Swedenborg has been called the Oprah of his time. He believed that in heaven people lived together in large, like-minded communities in a place resembling a better earth.

An actual denomination called Swedenborgians still exists today as a branch of guess what denomination? The United Church of Christ. In fact when I came to UCG I was also invited to be a candidate for a Swedenborgian Church near Philadelphia.

The Universalists developed a third new view of heaven out of the Civil War. They believed that everyone attained heaven in the end, rejecting the notion preached at many revivals that salvation was for Christians only.

Following all these pleasantly personal visions of heaven is kind of rational, questioning, contemporary Christianity represented in our time by one of my favorite writers, Bishop John Shelby Spong in his newest book, Eternal Life: A New Vision – Beyond Religion, Beyond Theism, Beyond Heaven and Hell.

Spong doesn't believe in what he calls an "invasive deity", a God above us, up in heaven, pulling the strings of our lives, intervening with miracles to upset the natural workings of science. Spong sees Christianity to be about Jesus as a fully human one in whom God is present and visible, a symbol of God within and among us.

Spong believes in Jesus, not as one who was raised from the dead by the intervention of an external supernatural being, but rather as one who was transformed so greatly in this life that he transcended all divisions between people and time. Resurrection for Spong is entering this transformative consciousness of Jesus and walking with him into the timelessness of God.

Spong believes that when we die, we do live again. He believes we catch glimpses eternity when we love wonderfully and wastefully in this world.

I think that this is something of what the writer of the book of Revelation speaks about with his promise of a vision of a new heaven and a new earth.

Rather than thinking of all these changing stories as inconsistent and contradictory, I see them as examples of that slogan of our denomination: God is still speaking. Each generation discovers, to paraphrase our compact, new dimensions of heaven's truth.

Remember when Rev. Jerry Falwell maintained that the famous Teletubby, Tinky Winky was recruiting children to be gay. After all, Falwell figured, if the name Tinky Winky wasn't enough he was purple (a gay color), had a triangular antenna (the triangle is a symbol of gay pride), and carried a magic bag (read purse!). After Falwell died, Daryl Cagle created a wonderful cartoon in which Falwell gets to the gates of heaven and discovers that the divine judge is not St. Peter, but you guessed it, Tinky Winky. The caption is, "Uh Oh."

That's a new heaven, one reflecting a new consciousness on earth, a consciousness that God's love expands beyond what we knew a generation, a century, an epoch ago. But notice again that this cartoon still fits the old stereotype of heaven in the clouds with a judge at the gate.

Which brings me to the third book, this one given to me by UCG member Richard Elkins, Sum - Forty Tales from the Afterlives by David Eagleman. It's a little book, just over 100 pages long. I'm putting copies of all three books in the library. Each tale is a creative fable of heaven, which turns out to have something of an inherent contradiction. Here's my favorite because it's closest to my vision of heaven.

In this story of heaven, called "Egalitaire" which stands for equality, God in originally creating heaven got it wrong. She gave in to the peer pressure of other gods and set up a binary division of people into good and evil. God soon realized that people weren't just plain good or evil, as she thought when she was younger. She tried very hard to come up with complex formulas that fairly weighted good against evil. She even tried a computer program. But eventually she realized that people were multi-dimensional, and she couldn't live with the rigidity of her youthful choices.

She was miserable and couldn't come up with a solution until in a moment of desperation she granted every single person a place in heaven, since every one had something good inside.

She fired the devil and closed down hell. Everyone righteous or not so much got equal time with her. The most important thing to her was that everyone be treated equally, an idea that never came true on earth.

Well the communists got irritated because God achieved the perfect society they wanted to create without God. The meritocrats, folks who believed only people who studied and worked hard deserved good things, were annoyed that since there were no incentives to work hard they were stuck with a bunch of pinkos. The conservatives had no poor people to disparage, and the liberals had no downtrodden to promote.

God then weeps because the only thing everyone can agree on is that they're all in hell.

My own favorite view of eternity, which you can read in detail in our book, The Long Winding Journey Home, p. 465, is that there is one place where we all go. It's like a classical music concert, which for some would be heaven, others hell, and others a place of learning. But instead of music, the concert is a community where love rules, people are kind and forgiving, and good truly does overcome evil. For people who dedicated their lives to cheating, lying and bullying, this is hell. For those who truly loved on earth, it is heaven. For most of us it would be what is something of a continued growth experience.

Stories of heaven reflect the ways God is still speaking in our lives, and I think they are best left as stories to dream on rather than blueprints to argue about.

In times when people struggle and are poor, they look to heaven as a place of comfort and wealth. In our era of abundance, we look for deeper relationships, or perhaps free time. New heavens reflect the new earths we long to co create with God.

I love the quote at the top of your bulletin from the novel Gilead by Marilynne Robinson. The main character in the novel is an aging minister in conversation with his good friend Boughton, also a minister, who answers the question of what is heaven. He says, "Mainly I just think about the splendors of the world and multiply by two. I'd multiply by ten or twelve if I had the energy. But two is much more than sufficient for my purposes."

I still think my favorite and sweetest story of heaven comes from my mother-in-law, Evelyn Sebastian. She lives in the Village here in Gainesville and turns 91 in two weeks. About five years ago on a pleasant October Sunday afternoon we brought her out to the house we own with another couple on Lake Santa Fe. We had brought Chinese food, which she loves. We were sitting on an upstairs screen porch, which she loves because she's off the ground and the bugs are screened out. It looks out on a stand of Cypress trees onto the lake. It was fall, the

air was perfect and the setting sun behind us turned everything golden. And of course her daughter, Sandy, was there, whom she loves.

Evelyn looked out and around and said, “I hope heaven is as good as this.”

And the writer of Revelation said, “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. The first earth had passed away...”

For Further Reference:

Lisa Miller, Heaven: Our Enduring Fascination With the Afterlife

John Shelby Spong, Eternal Life: A New Vision – Beyond Religion, Beyond Theism, Beyond Heaven and Hell

David Eagleman, Sum - Forty Tales from the Afterlives