

Lenten Sermon Series: Surprised By Hope
“Hope of Heaven”
Salem United Methodist Church
Psalms 121, John 3:1-17; Romans 8:18-25; Ephesians 1:7-10
March 16, 2014
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During the season of Lent we are delving into Bishop N. T. Wright’s book called “Surprised By Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church.”

Each week we are taking a chapter from his video series. Last week we talked about the “Hope of the Resurrection” which sparked some great discussion. This week the title is called, “Hope of Heaven.”

One person said to me last week that they weren’t interested in going to heaven if it meant sitting on clouds and playing harps all the time. That just isn’t the life for him! Some of us may see this kind of heavenly lifestyle as a respite from the stressful and hectic lives we lead, but then after a while heaven may get boring, too. Is heaven a place above the clouds? One cosmonaut is to have said when he came back from space that he didn’t find God or heaven out there. While other astronauts are to have said upon their return, that there has to be a Creator of this Universe. They were in awe of the vastness of creation as they orbited the earth. If heaven isn’t above the earth, what is heaven and why is there hope when we speak of heaven? Some believe that heaven is somewhere that we go when we die. There are many who have had near death experiences who have returned to talk about seeing dead relatives and being drawn to the light. According to a biblical interpretation, what these people are experiencing is Paradise, the resting place, a place to be refreshed until we receive our resurrection which will be our final destination when God’s new creation is complete. Others believe that there is a great distance or chasm between heaven and earth. God who lives in there in heaven is a long, long way off. I think one thing that confuses us about heaven being up in the sky or a long, long way off may reside in passages like John 3 where Jesus speaks about ascending into heaven and descending to earth. We commonly define “ascend” as to move upward, but another definition is to take up a position. When we think of “descend” we commonly think of going down, but it also can mean lowering one’s self below one’s usual standards. These two latter definitions of “ascend” and “descend” are more in keeping of what we think of Jesus. When Jesus ascended to heaven he took up his rightful position there. When he descended to earth, we say he humbled himself to become one of us. He lowered himself from his usual heavenly standards to become one of us.

What is heaven? The biblical view of heaven lies in one phrase that we pray every Sunday. “Thy (your) kingdom come, thy (your) will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Heaven and earth operate in concert with the other. Heaven and earth are closely connected. They interlock. Bishop Wright defines heaven as God’s control center. When I first read his definition of heaven, I had some issues with it. I just don’t see God as a being who controls us. I believe that we have free will. We are not puppets on a string or robots. God doesn’t push a button that tells us what to do. So why would heaven be God’s control center? Then I thought, don’t we need Someone who has control over the universe? Someone to set up the rules for the universe to function? Someone who has authority? Who governs, or runs everything we depend upon to live on this earth? Would we really want humans to rule something like the weather? From the most microscopic animal to a star millions of light years away, everything is created so that it all works together. God is in control of it. This is something in which we can truly be thankful. We see this gratefulness in Psalm 121. We need God to oversee our lives, to be our Creator, Protector, Provider, Redeemer- the one who saves us. This gives me a sense of hope and peace. God is near and not some place far away. God is as close to us as a breath, a veil, a curtain. C. S. Lewis in his *Chronicles of Narnia* gives us an excellent example of these two different realities. Do you recall the children, Peter, Susie, Edmund, and Lucy who would pass through the wardrobe into another reality, Narnia? Both worlds were real. These two worlds related to each other.

The ancient Jews didn’t need Narnia to understand how closely connected heaven and earth are. They believed that God actually resided on earth in a room in the Temple called the Holy of Holies. They understood the concept of heaven touching earth. Jesus himself tells us that he came to earth to reveal to us God’s love and offer us eternal life. When Nicodemus comes to speak to Jesus, he recognizes the presence of God in Jesus through his teachings and healings. It is in Jesus where heaven and earth meet. Jesus then tells Nicodemus that heaven and earth can meet in anyone. But there is a type of birth that needs to occur- a birth from of heaven. As

we are born from our mother, so we can be born of God. Heaven can be born in us. “Thy kingdom come.” This concept of Jesus being the One in which heaven and earth meet is echoed in Ephesians. The mystery of the will of God is shown in Jesus. What we see in Jesus is what God wants to see now in us and plans to bring it to its fullness or completeness. This is when heaven and earth interlocks or intersects. Revelation promises that at the end of time heaven will come to earth like a groom to his bride. Heaven and earth will be united at last. What a celebration that will be! This has been God’s plan from the beginning when he created heaven and earth. These two just fit together: God’s space (heaven) working together in our space (earth).

Some of you may be wondering if heaven is not a destination when we die, what about hell? Since about the 12th century, the Christian faith has claimed that Heaven and hell are places of equal and opposite realities: Heaven being a place up in the sky and hell existing under the earth. We’ve been told that if one does the right thing, one goes to heaven. If one does not, one goes to hell. In the Bible heaven is not equal and opposite to hell. Heaven comes together with earth but God give us free choice. We choose if we want to be part of this heaven-joining-up-with-earth reality, or we can choose to keep heaven out of our lives so we can make and control our own world. The concept of “going to hell” has been used as a threat, a sort of safe guard from punishment. “Oh, you better not do this or that or you will burn in hell.” Bishop Wright states: “Heaven and hell are states of existence. [The difference between the two is that] in the life of heaven when it is joined to earth we become more truly human. And hell is where we become less truly human. [We] become like what [we] worship. If [we] worship the God in whose image [we] are made, [we] become more genuinely human. If [we] refuse to worship God, if [we] hold God at arm’s length, if [we] say, “I don’t want to have anything to do with you or for you to have anything to do with me in my life,” then [we] are colluding the dangerous possibility of becoming less and less genuinely human. That is a tragic possibility that all of us need to be aware.” I would say that when humans become less and less genuinely human we actually create hell on earth. We do things and say things that are create pain and suffering. The Bible has great promises as to how we can be part of God’s new creation. One of those promises can be found in our Second Epistle Lesson today. Paul writes that even in the midst of suffering God is revealing God’s glory in us. “The whole creation waits breathless with anticipation for the revelation of God’s sons and daughters.” He continues, “We ourselves who have the Spirit as the first crop of the harvest also groan inside as we wait to be adopted.” God invites us and in fact is depending on us to be part of his new creation which began in the Resurrection of Jesus.

No, heaven is not a place where we will be sitting on clouds playing harps after we die. Heaven is not someplace where we go after we die, but it is a spiritual reality that can be given birth in us here and now. God’s space and our space can meet to work together. God’s sovereign rule of heaven (that’s theological language for “control room”) is coming to birth on earth. People who have been born of God’s spirit, live out God’s will, build God’s new world, are agents of God’s love, creating, celebrating, and extending God’s glory to the world. When we think of heaven as a place that we create with God rather than a place we go to at the end of our lives, how then do we view what we do every day? It changes, doesn’t it? We no longer live for the creation of our own little worlds, but we see ourselves, each of us being called into a mission, to be part of building God’s new world, being agents of God’s love. We are not to sit around in comfort waiting to be taken home. No matter what our age or our ability, God is inviting us to be workers in this new creation. We are to be looking for ways to bring God’s peace and justice on earth as it is in heaven. We are to be looking for ways to offer God’s love and hope. Many are already being heavenly agents on earth. Some have careers that focus on bringing hope, peace, and/or justice on earth. Some offer hope in some way to their co-workers, family members, or neighbors. Those who are not employed or retired, volunteer in variety of ways to offer hope to those in need. Every day we are to be open to where God is trying to connect heaven with earth and be open to how we can be a part of this. Every day we are to ask God to help us find ways to assist God in building a new world of hope, peace, justice, and love. Every day we are to ask, “How can I be an agent of God’s new creation?”

Resources: *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 1*, David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds.; *Surprised By Hope* by N. T. Wright