



Heaven Can't Wait

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Joseph G. Schaller

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost ~ September 27, 2020

Exodus 17:1-7

The Israelites left the desert of Syn to travel by stages, as YHWH had directed them. They camped at Rephidim, but found no drinking water. Again they turned on Moses, saying, "Give us drinking water." Moses replied, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test YHWH?" But the people were thirsty, and complained even more to Moses. "Why did you bring us out of Egypt only to make us and our children and our livestock die of thirst?" Moses appealed to YHWH. "What am I to do with these people? They are ready to stone me!" YHWH answered Moses, "Take some of the elders and move to the front of the people. Take with you the staff with which you struck the Nile. Go! I will wait for you there by the rock of Horeb.† Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink." And Moses did so, in the sight the elders. Moses named the place Massah, "Testing," and Meribah, "Quarreling," for the Israelites tested YHWH when they said, "Is YHWH with us or not?"

Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16

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| 1 | Hear my teaching, O my people; *
incline your ears to the words of my mouth. | | in the land of Egypt, in the field of Zoan. |
| 2 | I will open my mouth in a parable; *
I will declare the mysteries of ancient times. | 13 | You split open the sea and let them pass through; *
you made the waters stand up like walls. |
| 3 | That which we have heard and known,
and what our forebears have told us, *
we will not hide from their children. | 14 | You led them with a cloud by day, *
and all the night through with a glow of fire. |
| 4 | We will recount to generations to come
your praiseworthy deeds and your power, O God, *
and the wonderful works you have done. | 15 | You split the hard rocks in the wilderness *
and gave them drink as from the great deep. |
| 12 | You worked marvels in the sight of their forebears, * | 16 | You brought streams out of the cliff, *
and the waters gushed out like rivers. |

Philippians 2:1-13

If our life in Christ means anything to you—if love, or the Spirit that we have in common, or any tenderness or sympathy can persuade you at all—then be united in your convictions and united in your love, with a common purpose and a common mind. That is the one thing that would make me completely happy. There must be no competition among you, no conceit, but everybody is to be humble: value others over yourselves, each of you thinking of the interests of others before your own. Your attitude must be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

Christ, though in the image of God,
didn't deem equality with God
something to be clung to—
but instead became completely empty
and took on the image of oppressed humankind:
born into the human condition,
found in the likeness of a human being.
Jesus was thus humbled—
obediently accepting death, even death on a cross!
Because of this, God highly exalted Christ
and gave to Jesus the name above every other name,
so that at the name of Jesus every knee must bend
in the heavens, on the earth and under the earth,
and every tongue proclaim to the glory of God:
Jesus Christ reigns supreme!

Therefore, my dear friends, you who are always obedient to my urging, work out your salvation with fear and trembling, not only when I happen to be with you, but all the more now that I'm absent. It is God at work in you that creates the desire to do God's will.

Matthew 21:23-32

Jesus entered the Temple precincts and began teaching. The chief priests and the elders of the people came to him and said, "By what authority are you doing what you do? Who gave you this authority?" "And I," replied Jesus, "will ask you a single question; if you give me the answer, I will tell you my authority for these actions. What was the origin of John's right to baptize? Was it divine or was it human?" They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'divine,' he will respond, 'Then why did you refuse to believe him?' But if we say 'human,' we have the people to fear, for they regard John as a prophet." So they replied to Jesus, "We don't know."

Jesus said in reply, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things." Jesus continued, "What do you think? There was a landowner who had two children. The landowner approached the elder and said, 'My child, go out and work in the vineyard today.' This first child replied, 'No, I won't,' but afterwards regretted it and went. The landowner then came to the second child and said the same thing. The second child said in reply, 'I'm on my way,' but never went. Which of the two did what was wanted?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "The truth is, tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God before you. When John came walking on the road of justice, you didn't believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. Yet even when you saw that, you didn't repent and believe."

Earlier this week, while enjoying one of the sun drenched crisp early mornings we've been having lately, I had a thought: I don't know just where God "is," but I'm pretty sure about where God is not, and that would be heaven. That may sound like a very odd conclusion. Over millennia, we've constructed images of heaven precisely in relation to an appropriate home of God. And we've held onto the idea of God as an entity who can reside in a "place."

As an aside, check out a satirical piece in the most recent edition of the New Yorker magazine: One-Star Yelp Reviews of Heaven. Comments range from: Not a fan of the pearly-white color scheme. To I thought the whole point of this place was to be together with your dead loved ones, but when I got here my dead loved ones were busy hanging out with Shakespeare, Churchill and Tallulah Bankhead. They should really work it out so that families stay together and don't have to compete with every dead person who ever lived. And God.

And one more: What a farce! I'm a churchgoing Christian who prayed everyday of her adult life, then I get here and find the place overrun with seemingly anyone who didn't kill a million people. Sorry Stalin, Hitler and Pol Pot—you're not welcome here. But apparently for everyone else, it's "Come on in!" Yesterday I saw my high school chemistry teacher. Ugh.

My complaint about heaven—not having seen it, mind you—is that it is always presented as sometimes of idealized, perfect place. While it makes sense to think of the Divine in these terms, the extension of these ideas to the divine environment creates a bit of a problem. Granted, I understand how we might all long to end up in a place of perfection after dealing with a world that seems so far from perfect most of the time. But by locating God in this "place," we inevitably split God off from the world. This gets played out throughout Christian history in variations of the dichotomy heaven: good; world: bad. But how can we again see the whole of creation as being completely embraced by God? And just as we might admit that we are all implicated in the sinfulness of the world, we can also say that we are also fully implicated in God's holy presence.

We might well wish for a little more of "heaven" right now. It would be so nice to be able to look forward to a place where there is no Covid, no politics, no racism, no global warming, no hurricanes, no robocalls!

When the Israelites were led out of Egypt, they were probably expecting more felicitous journey to the promised land. Obviously, things did not go as smoothly as expected. Their complaining and kvetching might be expected, given the relative harshness of conditions and the fact that their leader seemed to be perpetually in need of Yahweh's intervention to come up with basics such as food and water. But the real meaning of the story is that Yahweh would always be with them, in spite of challenging circumstances. The real temptation is to give into the belief that we are completely on our own.

Paul's letter to the people of Philippi is perhaps his most personal and gentle of all his correspondence. Still, he finds it necessary to remind these Christians of their identity and their calling. It also contains one of the most profound theological statements in all of Paul's writings:

Your attitude must be the same as that of Christ Jesus:
Christ, though in the image of God,
didn't deem equality with God
something to be clung to—
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Jesus was thus humbled—
obediently accepting death, even death on a cross!

This is more than a ploy to shame the Christians into better behavior. It is an assertion about the nature of the Christ event. Christ is God's complete outpouring into creation, a complete emptying of the powerful God to take on the full human condition, including oppression and death.

This is why we can't look for God in heaven but must find God in all things here within created reality. This complete presence of God does not mean that we always get what we want or can avoid all that the vagaries of life might bring. But it does enlist in what has been called the Christ project, the relentless pursuit of justice and peace.

In the Gospel, the two children of the landowner are really two types of persons manifesting different responses to the call to become involved in the Christ project. The second child might be an example of the one who is all talk but no action. We can talk a good game and make all kinds of promises and have the best of intentions, but not be able to follow-through. The first individual is perhaps more discerning as well as wary. Sensing the enormity of the task, they are reticent to commit. But at the end of the day, they persevere to get the job done. Or at least part of the job, because the job is never finished.

At this point, I want to acknowledge the life of Ruth Bader Ginsberg, whose passing has saddened (and frightened) so many. It's important to remember how impossible her ambition seemed when she began her commitment to fight gender discrimination, both in her own advancement and in the cases fought in court. But she became an indefatigable defender of justice. Not everyone agreed with her, and we are now facing a real threat to what she fought for will be undone. But it can never be completely undone. There may never be another RBG, but there have been and will be many who have been inspired her to take on some of the most serious challenges of our times.

If you want to find God, find the people who embody God's passion for justice. They will not be perfect people, but they will be passionate and committed. In the Christian tradition, we call these people "saints," though we don't have to wait until long after they've died or until approved by institutional authority. And look beyond the usual over-achievers. Look to the edges of our society—to those who struggle and who are rejected by those in power—but who actually live heroically day by day. As for heaven, let's not wait for the hereafter. Let's continue to discover and create it right in the midst of the full catastrophe of human existence.