

August 27, 2023 – Isaiah 51:1-6, Romans 11:33-12:8, Matthew 16:13-20

I received a notice in my email recently. It was an announcement about the upcoming Missouri District pastors' conference that happens every year at Tan-tar-a, down at the lake. I enjoy these conferences a lot. They always have good topics. Great, edifying speakers. And a general opportunity to have insightful, uplifting conversation with fellow pastors.

But I enjoy them for another reason as well. Because for the last three conferences, I think, I have been given a room with a balcony overlooking the marina. And the weather has been perfect. And on the first afternoon of the conference, just after I arrived, before the keynotes started, I have taken a chair onto the balcony, sat with the blue sky above me and the blue water below me, and the cool lake breeze on my face. And I have just sat there, soaking in the tranquility, thinking, "This is heaven."

It's not heaven, of course. We all know that. As a pastor, it feels almost wrong to think it. But there's a human desire, a human need, to find glimpses of heaven on earth. We're fascinated with the question, "What is heaven like?" And so we look for moments that might be comparable.

The funny thing is that, we can find a much better example of heaven on earth in God's Word. Because there are moments all through scripture when God brings heaven to earth. When he shows us exactly what we're looking for.

Consider our Old Testament lesson. Here, we have a vision from Isaiah. Isaiah isn't writing to the people of his own day. Frankly, he's already given up on them. No, Isaiah is talking to his countrymen in the future. Suffering in exile away from Jerusalem. For them, heaven feels like it couldn't be further away.

But he reveals for them a world where heaven has come to earth. He shows them a tiny family, Abraham and Sarah, alone and childless. And yet, from just the two of them, so much potential. All of God's people, just waiting to be born. All of God's plan of salvation, resting on two elderly believers. Because that's all that God needs to bring heaven to earth.

He shows them Jerusalem. A wasteland the last time they saw it. A city devastated by war. The once fruitful farmland around it now a wilderness. And yet, just below the surface, it is waiting to blossom like the Garden of Eden. Like a desert blooming after a rainstorm. One drop of God's grace falls upon it, and suddenly paradise is reborn. Heaven on earth.

For he tells them that on that day, on that last day, on the day of the resurrection of all flesh, songs of sorrow will become shouts of joy. God's salvation will go forth and, though that old heaven and earth will pass away, God's righteousness will remain. His salvation will endure forever. Heaven, paradise, eternal life, is waiting to be revealed. It's just barely out of sight. But it's there.

We see this again in our Gospel lesson. Jesus has drawn his disciples north, far above the Sea of Galilee. Far outside of Israel. To the city of Caesarea Philippi.

The place was ancient. It had been a site for worshipping Baal among the Canaanites, and then Pan among the Greeks, and then Caesar among the Romans. Throughout its entire history, the city of Caesarea Philippi had never once worshipped the God of Israel.

Yet, it is here that Peter confesses the work of God in Jesus Christ. Here, at the gates of hell, Peter defies the ancient pagan religions. He doesn't worship a fertility god like Baal or a god of nature like Pan or a god of political power like Caesar.

No, Peter worships the living God, the creator of all things, who promised in Isaiah to bring salvation to the ends of the earth, and has now come to live and walk among his people. Peter confesses Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of the living God. Immanuel, God with us. Heaven come down to earth.

Isaiah sees it. Peter sees it. And St Paul in our Epistle lesson sees it. But he sees it in a slightly different way. Because while Isaiah and Peter are both looking forward to the salvation found in Christ, for Paul, Christ stands behind him. Christ has already come. His salvation is already here.

And what Paul shows us is a world changed by the Gospel. A desert that is already blooming. A church that already has Peter's confession as its cornerstone.

And all of Paul's letter to the Romans has been building up to this. For chapter after chapter, Paul has recounted the story of God's salvation throughout Scripture. A salvation first given to the Jews, but now accessible to all. Even the Roman Gentiles reading this letter.

And Paul is in awe at the fulfillment of God's salvation. None of the Jews, none of his own people, saw God's salvation coming in exactly this way. But that just makes it all the more amazing. He writes, "*O the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!*"

Paul has seen the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy from our Old Testament reading this morning. He has seen death turn into life, through Jesus Christ. Could there be a more perfect example of wastelands becoming gardens, of pain becoming comfort, of sorrow becoming joy and gladness, than what the women found on Easter morning? Which means that Isaiah's day of restoration for all peoples – Jew and Gentile, young and old – cannot be far away. The glory of heaven is at hand.

But then Paul turns his eyes to the church in Rome. Now, the Roman Christians would not have seemed very glorious to the world around them. Not many of them were rich. Not many of them were powerful. They gathered together in small house churches, their lives a far cry from the glories of Rome around them, much less the glories of heaven. And yet, as Paul looks at these people, he sees heaven on earth.

He writes, "*I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.*" Hidden inside these small house churches, far from the glories that Isaiah talks about, the Roman Christians have forgotten who they are.

They have forgotten that Christ has made them holy and acceptable by his blood. And they have forgotten that God doesn't need the glory of a temple or a holy city. That every time they come to worship, they stand before the temple of God. And they are the living sacrifice of God's altar.

Because in that act of spiritual worship, there will be something inside them that is sacrificed. Their sin. Their temptation. Their evil hearts and unclean hands. Everything in their minds that needs to be renewed.

They will not be a dead sacrifice, like in the Old Testament. Killed to atone for sin. They will not be a sacrifice like the one Christ made for them. Crucified in their place. But instead, they will be a living sacrifice. A sacrifice made more alive by presenting themselves to the Lord. And letting him teach them his good and perfect will.

So the glories of heaven are not far from the Romans or from us. Every time we gather to worship. Every time we kneel before this altar to receive Christ's body and blood. Every time we present our bodies and the bodies of our children to the Lord as living sacrifices in Holy Baptism, we see heaven on earth.

For we are not just in this little church. We are at the altar of God, before his glorious temple. Made alive and acceptable through him.

But more than that, we see heaven on earth out there too. In our town and in our homes and in our businesses. We see all those places full of heaven. Because they are full of us.

We are one body in Christ. We are heaven on earth. Because that desert that bloomed for Isaiah, and that rock upon which the church is built... those are in our hearts as well. We were once a wasteland whom God restored to life by his grace. We are living temples for the Holy Spirit, with Christ as our cornerstone. We shine a light into dark places. We speak a word of life in a dying world.

For the apostle Paul, there was some concern that the Roman Christians would take pride in their status. Paul warns them, *“For by the grace given to me I say to everyone not to think of himself more highly than he ought.”* God’s people, today, however, often have the opposite problem, I think.

Ask a fellow Christian how God works among his people, and see what they say. “Oh, he uses this pastor at my church. He uses this service organization in my synod. He uses authors and teachers and men of faith like Martin Luther or Billy Graham or Pope Francis.” Ask a fellow Christian how God works among his people and they’ll point to everyone else. Except themselves.

Don't think of yourself more highly than you ought. But don't think of yourself too little either. For each one of us is given gifts. As Paul listed at the end of our reading, we have gifts of prophecy and service and teaching and exhortation and generosity and leadership and mercy.

Gifts enough to fill this town with heaven. This state with heaven. Gifts enough to fill this whole earth with heaven. Until that day when wastelands become gardens, pain becoming comfort, sorrow becoming joy and gladness. For that will be the day when our tomb will be opened. And we will say with all sincerity, “This is heaven.”