

August 27, 2017 – Isaiah 51:1-6, Romans 11:33-12:8, Matthew 16:13-20

The poet and devout Christian, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, once wrote:

Earth's crammed with heaven
and every common bush afire with God
but only he who sees takes off his shoes.

The poem is a reference to Moses and the burning bush. Moses who, at the time, was nothing more than a simple shepherd. But who saw the fire of God on the bush. Heard the voice of God speaking from it. Obeyed the voice. Believed the voice. And took off his shoes, for he knew that he was standing on holy ground.

Moses saw heaven come down to earth, and he believed. And through her poem Elizabeth Barrett Browning wants us to realize that we have more opportunities to be like Moses than we realize. Because earth is crammed full of heaven. And we see proof of that throughout our lessons this morning.

Consider the Old Testament reading. 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 couldn't be farther away.

But he reveals for them a world crammed full of heaven. 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.

He shows them Jerusalem. A wasteland the last time they saw it. A city devastated by war. The 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 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.

In the Holy Gospel, we find Caesarea Philippi crammed full of heaven. Jesus has drawn his disciples north, far above the Sea of Galilee. Far outside of Israel.

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 through Jesus Christ. Here, 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.

Earth is crammed full of heaven. 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. Showing him a world changed by the Gospel.

Showing him a desert that is already beginning to bloom. Showing him a church that already has Peter's confession as its cornerstone. Showing him how this world, now more than ever, is crammed full of heaven. If we only see and take off our shoes.

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 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 earth crammed with heaven.

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 to the Lord as living sacrifices, like we did with little Drake and Jace this morning. Earth is crammed full of heaven.

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 earth crammed with heaven 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. 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. 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 cram this whole earth with heaven. Until wastelands become gardens, pain becoming comfort, sorrow becoming joy and gladness. Until one day everyone will see the fire of God and take off his shoes. Because on that day, the whole earth will be holy ground. Amen.