

“Heaven Help Us”

2 Corinthians 4:13 – 5:1

Pastor Liz Miller

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The next world. The life to come. The hereafter. The promise land. The great beyond. Nirvana. Paradise - not to be confused with Paradise City where the grass is green and the girls are pretty. Eternal Home. Thy kingdom come. The pearly gates. The happy hunting ground in the sky. Or simply: heaven. The idea that some part of a person's spirit or soul continues after their bodily death is found in almost every major world religion, whether it is a specific place or tied to the concept of reincarnation.

In progressive Christianity, we talk a lot about justice, discipleship, and loving our neighbors, but we don't have a lot of conversations about eternal life. It's a theological concept, or idea about God, that some are apt to say, “What difference does it make if we can't know for sure? What does it have to do with my life right now?” There are even times when the idea of eternal life comes up and the undertone in the conversation is that dreaming of heaven is for those other Christians, not us logical, pragmatic, reasonable Christians. It can't be proved, and therefore, some might say, why bother believing in it or exploring it or imagining it. Except, there are people still walking among us who believe they have done more than imagine heaven – they believe they have had a glimpse of it.

People like my mom, who with her military background and 30 year nursing career is the most pragmatic and skeptical person I have ever met in my life. 10 years ago in a theatre in London's West End, my mom was enjoying the first act of *A Raisin in the Sun* when her heart stopped beating. Literally – she was carried out of the theatre on a stretcher. She woke up some

time later, having been revived by a medic in the audience and received a diagnosis of atrial fibrillation. She woke with a distinct memory of spending a few minutes in a waiting room full of people, being called up one by one to make their way through the door that would lead them to eternity. She was quick to note there was only one door – everyone was headed to the same place. After that heart-stopping, life-changing event, my mom went from having no use for thoughts of eternity to confidently saying, “I know what heaven looks like, and it starts in a waiting room.”

I think it is more than a proclivity to scientific proof that has made so many God-seeking, faith-practicing, Jesus-admiring people hesitate to proclaim a belief in heaven. In many Christian contexts, heaven has been used to define the haves and the have nots, the difference between those “worthy of God's love,” and those “surely bound for hell.” The requirements seem to get narrower and narrower until it seems impossible for anyone to live a good long life and still gain access. God's kingdom has been twisted into a threat for those of us who stand outside of what the moral code du jour is. Fear of being cast out of eternal life has been used to coerce people into a narrow idea of what it means to be a good Christian. This modern practice of fear stands in contrast to the Gospels, which consistently widens its ideas of who is welcome in God's kingdom. These fear tactics are not very Christ-like and are far from the theology of heaven that we read about in 2 Corinthians.

Heaven is not supposed to be a threat – it is supposed to bring hope. And Biblical ideas of heaven are not for people with social power, economic power, or religious power to hold over, control, or frighten those without power – it is meant to empower those who previously did not have power.

The passage we read today from 2 Corinthians is preceded by a passage that is important for us to fully understand what we just read. We are in the middle of a letter from Paul to the church in Corinth, Greece. Paul visited this church several months ago and they have a strained

relationship with each other. Paul is defending his ministry to and against other leaders in the early church who knew Jesus personally or have better leadership gifts than he does. He's making a case for why he deserves to be heard, and in doing so he tries to move himself out of the center and put the focus on God. He talks about the persecution that he has undergone and reminds people that his strength to face this persecution is not because of any gift he has – his strength comes from God. Paul proclaims that God brings light and hope to even the most bleak of situations.

This is where our reading from today begins. Paul's message is for anyone who has struggled. Anyone who knows what suffering is. Anyone who has been persecuted or oppressed. It is to remind us that no matter what is going on, or how difficult life feels, God is with us. Nothing can change that and nothing can make God leave us. Paul's words are not meant to divide people into good and bad and they are not intended to be used to keep out people. They were meant to show people love and to offer them hope.

Let's hear his words again, but imagine hearing them as someone who has lost all hope. Someone who is struggling with an illness or the pain of aging. Someone who has lost their best friend or the love of their life. Someone who struggles with depression or anxiety and wonders if they are the only one. Someone who is living with the threat of deportation or government persecution or being separated from their child. Someone who has been told they should be ashamed of who they love or how they express their gender. Imagine you are someone who needs some good news because the weight of this world feels too heavy to hold. Paul's words are for you:

“We do not lose heart.” Or rather, when we do lose heart, God is still with us. “Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure,

because we look not at what can be seen but what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal. For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”

With these words Paul reminds his readers that God's love will outlast any tyrant who rules on the earth. God's presence will remain with us through every trial and tribulation we face, and will see us to a time when our suffering ends and only peace remains. God will be with us in life as well as death, and no matter how difficult it is, our life matters. No amount of pain or terror or oppression can take away our life meaning something. Even when our earthly bodies are taken from us, God will remain, surrounding us with love. I don't know what that looks like – I hope to wait a long, long time to find out – but I know that when I say that God is greater than our imagination and is with us through the deepest of heartache, that includes the heartache of death.

A belief in heaven or eternal life does not mean you stop caring about the world around you today. It does not mean you put everything aside and sit in your corner waiting for your turn to come. What Paul is suggesting is that by reminding each other that we cannot be separated from God, we can have strength in the midst of our struggle. The reason the concept of eternal life has prevailed for so long is because it is the ultimate source of gratitude and empowerment – I can stand up for justice by putting my body on the line because the fear of death no longer makes me cower. I can face a diagnosis that will mean years of chemotherapy or physical therapy or a gradually weakening body because of the gratitude that no matter what happens to my earthly body, my life will be defined by the love of my spirit as radiated through God's love.

Our nation has been thinking in particular about the heartache of death this week with the news of two celebrities, unrelated to each other, dying by suicide. There have been some important articles written and shared about the quiet, daily struggle with depression – the

difficulty in reaching out for help when you can barely get out of bed in the morning. The promise of eternal life and God's everlasting love is the same for all people, no matter how someone dies. That is important for those of us to hear who have lost someone we love to suicide or other causes. God does not abandon anyone in this life or in death, no matter what. And for those who struggle with feeling a sense of purpose or meaning or belonging in this life, God is there, even when we don't see it. There is much love to be found in this lifetime, and we are called to reach out with arms of love to those who need it – to remind them of the hope that is buried inside them. To be God's hope and God's love on earth as it is in heaven.

There are a lot of images of what heaven looks like. My mom will tell you it starts in a waiting room. Some believe there are clouds and angels that welcome you in. Others picture their favorite place full of their favorite people. For others heaven is as if we become stardust, our souls splitting into the universe and reforming into other beings. I can't say for certain. But I do know that when we proclaim that God is a God of everlasting hope, everlasting hope doesn't stop when eternity begins. I know that when we proclaim that God sees us through all things, all things include life as well as death. I believe that no matter how upside down the world becomes, we are called to keep setting it right – anchoring it in peace and justice. My hope is that as we do this work together we can feel God's love with us, and know that nothing, not even death, can separate us from that love. Amen.