

Betsey Moe
“Anticipating the Afterlife”
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Revelation 21:1-7

21Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; 4he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” 5And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” 6Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. 7Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children.

Today I’ll be responding to not just one Question of Faith, but four which share a similar concern:

What happens to people when they die?
What proof is there of a heaven and hell?
Is death a deep, dark abyss of nothingness?
Is there life after our deaths, and how do we know?

Matthew 22:23-33

23The same day some Sadducees came to him, saying there is no resurrection; and they asked him a question, saying, 24“Teacher, Moses said, ‘If a man dies childless, his brother shall marry the widow, and raise up children for his brother.’ 25Now there were seven brothers among us; the first married, and died childless, leaving the widow to his brother. 26The second did the same, so also the third, down to the seventh. 27Last of all, the woman herself died. 28In the resurrection, then, whose wife of the seven will she be? For all of them had married her.” 29Jesus answered them, “You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. 30For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. 31And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, 32‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is God not of the dead, but of the living.” 33And when the crowd heard it, they were astounded at his teaching.

I’ve been thinking lately that, at our core, we are destination people.

Today, you left your home to come to church; you’ll leave the church to hit the store; you’ll leave the store to drive back home. Later, you’ll leave your home to go to a park, you’ll leave the park to go to the store (because who makes just one trip to the store in a

day?). These days, with gas prices the way they are, destinations are, more or less, intentional. I don't know about your family, but the only country drive our family takes is the "back way" to Costco. Our normal days are spent reaching one intended, predictable destination after another.

When we set out for more significant vacation destinations, we are even more intentional and planned out, having researched on the internet how we're going to get there, what activities we will be able to do each day, what the hotel room will look like.

We are destination people.

Is it any surprise, then, that some of our biggest questions for God deal with the matter of final destination? We – who are used to dealing in concrete destinations, who are used to being able to research any destination under the sun – want to know what our next life is going to look like, who will be with us, what we will do there, what our rooms will look like. *What happens to people when they die? What proof is there of a heaven and hell? Is death a deep, dark abyss of nothingness? Is there life after our deaths, and how do we know?*

I am aware of the sensitivity of these questions. These questions of faith may have been written in a spirit of curiosity by someone who wonders about life after death. It's one thing to be curious about the afterlife. It's another thing to need to know. To be grieving the loss of a friend, a parent, a spouse, a child, and to feel these questions lodged in the pit of your stomach. To be battling cancer yourself, and to feel these questions stuck in the back of your throat. In times when death is near, we want to know in what kind of afterlife we are placing our faith.

After all, we are destination people!

The problem is that the Bible does not tell us the details we expect to hear about heaven. As much as we might want it to be, the Bible is not like the internet that offers color pictures and video tours. The word "heaven" is mentioned plenty of times in the Bible – but often, it simply means the sky, the sun, moon, and stars – as in, "God created the heavens and the earth." When Jesus spoke of what the "kingdom of heaven" is like, he was referring to the world under God's rule, the reality of God among us, as in "the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which grows into the largest of garden plants" (Matthew 13:30). These are not the images and descriptions of heaven we might have been looking for.

Paul gives us more in 1 Corinthians 15 when he talks about resurrection life. He says that because Christ's body was raised from the dead, God will raise our bodies from the dead. "The trumpet shall sound, the dead shall be raised imperishable, and we shall all be changed." We know that our bodies will be raised, and that they will be different somehow, but if we want details of the how and when and where, we do not get it here.

Then there are some wonderful passages that fall under the category of metaphor: verbal pictures of the reign of God when Christ finally comes again to make all things new. In the first scripture reading from Revelation, we heard John's vision of the "new heaven and the new earth." It is a beautiful vision in which God is with God's children, tenderly wiping every tear from our eyes. In this new heaven and new earth, there is "no death, no crying, no pain." Another vision of God's reign – ah, one of my favorites – is from Isaiah: "The wolf shall live with the lamb,...the child shall play over the hole of the viper." (Isaiah 11:6-9). Isaiah sees peace – death-defying peace – as a sign of the fulfillment of creation.

In this new heaven and new earth, will God literally wipe every tear from our eyes? Will wolves and lambs and infants and snakes really all lie down together? Perhaps – but describing heaven to a "T" was not the intention of the writers. John's description of the transformed world, Isaiah's description of the peaceable kingdom, are attempts to set forth a vision of life under God's rule that is beyond the scope of our language, beyond the reach of our imaginations. The Bible is clear about the big things: that the same God who created the world laid claim to the world through Christ's death and resurrection. And in the end, all of us who belong to Christ will live with him in a transformed world. The details of all this? Not so clear.

It is no wonder that even Christians form visions of heaven that resemble St. Peter at the Pearly Gate jokes more than Biblical imagery, that even Christians watch and listen with rapt attention while a man named Jerry tells Oprah of his near-death experience on the operating table. We are destination people. If we are going to place our faith in a destination beyond this life, we want to know some concrete details.

The Sadducees in Jesus' time were people who dealt in concrete terms. They were a sect of religious men who only trusted the first five books of the Bible – "the books of Moses," they called them. Nowhere in these first five books was an indication that human bodies would be resurrected after death. And so they come to Jesus in the temple as he is teaching there and set him up with a kind of "trick question" to prove that their worldview is correct.

"Suppose a man dies," they say, "and his brother marries the widow. And then that brother dies, and so the next brother marries her, and dies, and so on until this woman has been married seven times. In your supposed resurrected afterlife, they want to know, "whose wife will she be?"

In my mind, this is Jesus' big chance to paint a complete picture of heaven and set them right. Tell them exactly what it's going to be like – streets of gold, wolves and lambs, light at the end of the tunnel – whatever it is! Surely giving a detailed description of heaven will lead these men to a different understanding, maybe even greater faith.

But Jesus does not do that. In his response, Jesus focuses on their understanding of God more than their understanding of life after death. They don't get it: first, people will neither marry nor be given in marriage in resurrected life. In other words, life will be

completely transformed; this woman will not be the property of any man when she dies. But then comes the heart of Jesus' response: "You are wrong," he says, "because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God." In their attempts to have a concrete understanding of life and death – a worldview they can argue and prove and in which they can place their faith – they had missed the power of God.

Shortly after Eric and I were married, he noticed that I was uptight on car rides when he was driving. If he got too close (in my opinion) to the car in front of us, I would grab the door handle and let out a sound like I was sucking all the saliva out of my mouth, preparing for death. Eric called me on it one day. He said, "If you're in the car when your dad is driving, you don't do that. What's the difference?"

The difference was that from the day I was born, my dad had driven me in our car. Before I needed to know anything about destinations, before I could see out the windows for myself, my dad had driven me in our car. I thought back to the treacherous Thanksgiving drives between Clarkston and Spokane, when Highway 195 on the Palouse was hardly visible because of blowing snow – yet we kids were so relaxed that we would sing songs or fall asleep. I remember being caught in rush hour traffic on family trips to Seattle when my hand did not once grab the door handle in terror. I could relax and enjoy the ride because from a deep place inside me, I trusted the driver.

Could this be what Jesus was saying to the Sadducees, and what Jesus is saying to us? Trust the driver – the God whose power is evident in scripture – and the details of the destination will take care of themselves.

Trust the God who created the world by breathing a word. Trust the God who promised Abraham a son and followed through. Trust the God who heard the cry of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt and made a way for them to escape. Trust the God who willingly died on a cross and rose from a tomb three days later. When it all comes down to it, our faith is not in heaven; our faith is in the power of God who raised Jesus from the dead. We do not trust in a place, but in a person.

We are destination people because from somewhere deep within us, we long for our true home. And that true home, it turns out, is not a place, but a fully redeemed relationship with God when we, together with all creation, are living under God's gracious rule. Thoughts of heaven may bring some comfort when we are fraught with questions, but a relationship with the Lord of heaven and earth will ultimately be our "greatest comfort, in life and in death." Praise God that this is a relationship that began at our baptisms, before we could see the snowstorms out the windows. Praise God that we belong to One who knows the way, who is the way, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.