

So Great A Cloud – Hebrews 11:29-31, 39-40, 12:1-2

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Most of you have been listening to me preach since my arrival eight years ago. And if you've listened closely (no guarantees there), I'll bet you know what I all have in my bag of tricks. As is the case with most preachers, I really only have a handful of sermons. I don't mean literal sermons; I'm not a good steward of my sermons in that I recycle them and reuse them.

What I mean is that preachers really only have about 8-10 themes (maybe less) that they focus their preaching around. And those themes or sermons come to light in many different iterations.

Every preacher has to have a good "God the creator" sermon, one that espouses the richness and vastness of God's creating and creative tendencies. There has to be a good "God's righteousness" sermon, one that trumpets God's treasuring of right behavior on the part of God's people and the necessity to shy away from that which gets us off target.

When it comes to Jesus, well, there's more than one sermon. God becoming one of us, so as to know what the human experience is and to reassure us that God knows what our suffering is like—that's one of my favorites. Jesus siding with the poor, the downtrodden, and the enslaved is another popular theme. And Jesus overcoming the power of death through resurrection and granting new life: that's, well, the crown jewel, isn't it?

Every preacher has a good "call" sermon—one that evokes the presence of the Holy Spirit working among us today and leading us to do things or behave in ways that are reflective of what God would have us do. Oh, and there's the sermon about the beauty and importance of living our faith together in community. In community, normally the church, we find strength and greater witness in being disciples. The Spirit does this also.

Those are just a few. And every preacher also has her or his unique interests that are reflective of unique life experiences and passions. These, too, fuel our preaching.

One of the sermons we Presbyterian preachers don't preach often or often enough has to do with—heaven. We just don't seem to go there very much—at least I don't. We'll gladly travel down the road of resurrection and talk about how Jesus is victorious over the powers of death. But heaven? Not too often. It's like we're scared of it for some reason, not wanting to be seen as coming off too Baptist or Pentecostal.

Maybe that's because we just don't know enough about it—what it's going to be like. And I hate to say this, but could it be that some of us really struggle with believing in heaven? The way we shy away from it might lead us to think so.

The reality is, we mostly use heaven as a foil for our jokes.

Two old men, Abe and Sol, are sitting on a park bench feeding pigeons and talking about baseball. Abe turns to Sol and asks, "Do you think there's baseball in Heaven?" Sol thinks about it for a minute and replies, "I dunno. But let's make a deal -- if I die first, I'll come back and tell you if there's baseball in Heaven, and if you die first, you do the same." They shake on it and sadly, a few months later, poor Abe dies. Soon afterward, Sol is sitting in the park feeding the pigeons by himself and hears a voice whisper, "Sol... Sol... ." Sol responds, "Abe! Is that you?" "Yes it is, Sol," whispers Abe. Sol, still amazed, asks, "So, is there baseball in Heaven?" "Well," says Abe, "I've got good news and bad news." "Gimme the good news first," says Sol. Abe says, "Well, there is baseball in Heaven." Sol says, "That's great! What news could be bad enough to ruin that?" Abe sighs and whispers, "You're pitching on Friday."

See, with heaven, it's all about the jokes.

What keeps us from embracing heaven, if we currently don't?

Within our culture, belief in a literal afterlife, a literal resurrection, and a literal heaven has fallen out of favor some.

Some of that comes from the fact that focusing entirely on heaven has come at the expense of focusing on the current needs of the kingdom of God here on earth. Why spend time working to bring greater prosperity to God's people on earth, some think, when heaven is just around the corner?

Or, maybe we have had some bad experiences with religion and its view of heaven in the past. Maybe we've been part of altar calls that coerce

us to coming forward to give our lives to Jesus so that we can get to heaven and avoid hell. In that view, heaven just becomes a much better alternative to a place or sense of being associated with suffering and destruction.

Debie Thomas, an Episcopalian minister, ponders all this in a recent essay in the *Christian Century*. She concedes the resistance to embracing heaven for the above reasons but writes, “I still need heaven to be real. After two-plus years of a global pandemic, too many mass shootings to count, daily headlines of war, a rapidly worsening climate, increasing economic inequality, ongoing violence, and a staggering national crisis of mental health, I need to know that a better world is not just possible but assured. Assured not only for those of us privileged enough to enjoy a fairly comfortable life here on earth, despite its many challenges, but also for those who, despite their fondest hopes and most earnest efforts, will not experience the salvific love, vindication, healing, and justice of God in this life.

“Civilian casualties of war. People in chronic pain. People who, for whatever reason, experience life on this earth as burdensome, lonely, terrifying, or hopeless. For all of these people, I need to know that love, hope, and justice are secured by the Christ who died for them, too. That while we have every obligation to alleviate suffering in this world, the salvation of God’s precious children does not finally depend upon our clumsy efforts. That the pain of human life matters infinitely to God—so much so that God’s working out of healing, equity, reconciliation, and justice will not end when a human being draws her final breath on this planet. That somehow, somewhere, someday, God will wipe every tear from every eye.”

I join Debie Thomas in yearning for that too.

Many have asked me what heaven will be like, as if their not knowing keeps them from embracing it as part of their eternal future. I heard one Biblical scholar who actually doesn’t believe in God, say that he thinks what happens when we die is that we just embark on a long, eternal nap. Life is just over when we die, and there’s peace and freedom from that which pains us on earth.

That might serve as a comfort, but to embrace heaven, though, means more than taking a long restful nap. It means finding that which Christ's resurrection conquered and refutes. Instead, of pain and suffering, heaven offers more than just reprieve. It offers the joy of new life that Christ came, died, and rose for. It provides us hope that all we endure here and the struggle we rightly engage in to make this world better will ultimately be supplanted by a life of meaning and prosperity we will never fathom until we one day experience it.

The writer of Hebrews commends the faith of the pioneers who have gone before us. The Israelites, Rahab, David, Samuel, and the other prophets. He coins them a "great cloud of witnesses." And this cloud of witnesses is far larger than this group in Hebrews. It consists of our heroes, too. Our cloud is made up of those who exemplify what it means to be faithful—encouraging, supporting, educating, and counseling. It is those who point us to God—and not only by their words, but by their actions.

I cannot get over how much all of you surrounded my son, Jacob, in these recent weeks before his leaving for college yesterday. It was overwhelming. The kind words of thanks you offered him, the gifts, the gestures, the counsel—I am awash in gratitude for how you have surrounded him and Joey with your love.

The other night, I reiterated to them how much they are both loved by this church family and how many young people today are not as fortunate as them to have such a supportive cloud of witnesses.

That cloud of witnesses exists in God's kingdom on earth, and it joins the great cloud of witnesses that have walked the face of the earth since the beginning and now reside in the kingdom of—heaven. It is their reward. And it will be our reward, too.

Again, Episcopalian minister Debie Thomas: "I no longer worry that a robust belief in heaven will lead to a lazy escapism. I worry about the opposite: that if the church loses its belief in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come, we will also lose the ferocity of our hope, the holy restlessness that leads us to action, the commitment to justice that fuels our prophetic lament, solidarity, resilience, and courage. After all,

how will we pray for God's kingdom to come, how will we credibly usher in that kingdom in whatever small ways we can here and now, if we don't believe in its ultimate fulfillment?"

The great cloud of witnesses we cling to and that we ultimately will be part of, were not prone to lazy escapism in this life. Their belief in the heaven they now inhabit motivated them to work to bring in the kingdom of God.

We cheer them, for they labored greatly and they now rest from their labor. Not in a state of eternal sleep, but in heaven.

Here's to heaven. We preachers, or any of us, should not forget it.