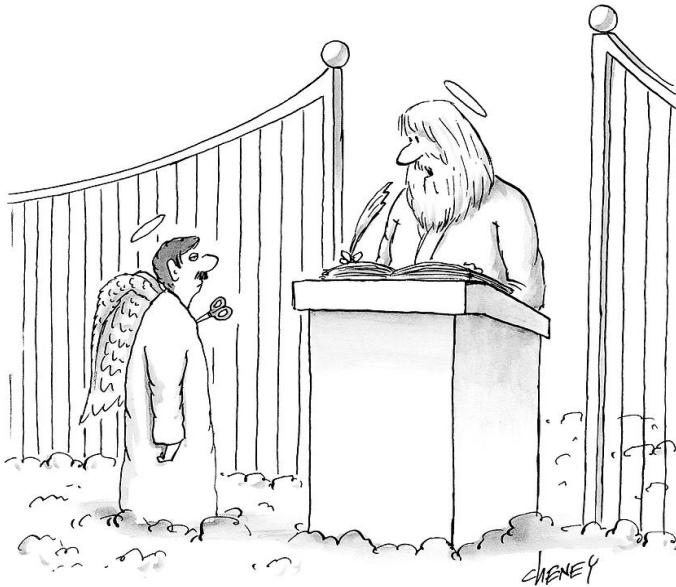


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# The Fifth Sunday of Easter

Acts 7

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*"Believe it or not, you're the first 'running with scissors' I've ever seen."*

*Filled with the Holy Spirit, Stephen gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said.*

I'm wondering if you've ever heard a Sunday morning sermon on the topic of heaven. I don't think I have, at least not since joining the Episcopal Church in college. Modern clergy, we creatures of the pragmatic, evidence-based here and now, have cultivated a careful silence around the topic. Why the silence? It hasn't always been this way, of course. 16th century Reformer John Calvin says that "commendation of the future and eternal life is a theme which deserves to be sounded in our ears by and by night...and made the subject of ceaseless meditation," but we've mostly moved on from such seemingly quaint contemplations. It's striking, however, if you pick up a work like Calvin's *Institutes* (and I realize that is a big "if"), you'll find that one of the chief ways he recommends pastors to help people make sense of this world was to contemplate the next. "Look," Calvin would say with Stephen: Contemplate heaven.

I think there are three reasons for the shortage of sermons on the theme. Theology, according to Rowan Williams, should be concerned with saying the least silly things possible about God, and frankly, talk about heaven quickly devolves into silliness, as images of *New Yorker* cartoons with Peter at the pearly gates, or of winged humans playing harps on puffy clouds, spring to mind, and embarrass the imagination. Talk about Heaven feels impractically silly. I think there is a silence from the pulpit because clergy, understandably so, don't want to pile on to the silliness.

The second reason for the silence on the topic is related to a conversation I recently had with a guy who was just finishing his Ph.D. in Neuroscience and, though a son of an Episcopal priest, had discovered a different religious path, and was training to become a Buddhist monk. I asked him his own views about a post-mortem existence, and before I could really finish the thought, he was shaking his head with

a gentle dismissal. “Nah, that’s not really anything we believe in.” I then couldn’t help but ask, “But do you want there to be a heaven; do you want there to be an eternal existence of bliss and reconciliation?” “It doesn’t much matter either way. But frankly, this one life is enough for me,” came the reply. There is a silence on the theme of heaven because clergy may shy away from this cool resignation; the modern person doesn’t just doubt heaven – they aren’t really interested in it.

Finally, there is the Marxist critique that suggests that hope for heavenly bliss diverts attention from earthly woe. By investing one’s energies into heavenly existence, one seems to be blissfully unconcerned with the means of production that shape this one. I remember encountering the Marxist critique firsthand through an exchange with a homeless man, Vit, at a shelter in Pittsburgh. Vit said, “Hey Pastah, the Bible promises me a home in heaven one day; I’m wondering if somebody can help me find a home down here.” We shouldn’t take Vit’s comment lightly. There is a silence on the theme of heaven because of the Marxist critique.

Okay, but it’s doubtful if any of this was on Stephen’s mind that day as the angered mob drew near to lynch him. This awful scene comes at the end of Chapter 7 of Acts. What incensed the mob of religious leaders was Stephen’s works of service and miracles performed in Jesus’s name. Before his would-be executioners, Stephen recounts the whole story of the Old Testament, beginning with Abraham, tracing the arc of the story through the birth and leadership of Moses, the Tabernacle and David, and then suggesting to them that this same God, whom their ancestors worshipped, raised Jesus from the dead. Stephen’s story of Yahweh’s steadfast love to Israel and then to Jesus was in effect his last lecture, a lecture that could really be condensed to 3 words: God is faithful. You think you can contain this God by your laws, your worship, but God doesn’t play by yours or anyone’s rules. This God doesn’t live in any house made by human hands, God isn’t beholden to any condition we put up. This

God explodes every container, even deaths. And there in the resurrection of Jesus we see that God is free to be Godself. God is faithful.

I want to take this very brief scene in Acts and think with you about 3 ways we may be invited to reflect on heaven, and some of its earthly implications. Notice first that when Stephen looks up toward heaven, his vision is refreshingly lacking in any cartoonish visions. Notice that Stephen doesn't see St. Peter standing at the pearly gates (Peter hasn't died yet!), nor does he see a heavenly mansion, or the 18-hole golf course the cherubim and seraphim designed all for him.

When Stephen looks up, he sees Jesus alive in the glory of God. This is an important detail. Stephen could recognize Jesus in heaven. Jesus isn't just a wispy, disembodied soul; not a pure, disincarnate spirit. Jesus is recognizable. He has features. He has a face. He still, according to Luke's earlier testimony, bears his wounds. God has raised the crucified Jesus whom Stephen knew into heaven. If we are to be raised into that fuller life, it shall be as ourselves, recognizable to ourselves and others. Some Eastern religions teach the personality's dissolution into the One; that isn't what Stephen would have us think. In some mysterious way, we shall still have our identities; the stories that made us, and the stories we made shall be part of our future existence.

One of the things we fear most, one of the hardest things to undergo with a loved one, is the loss of one's memory and identity. To see someone who has been the epicenter of your heart's love drift off into another thought world has to be one of the most difficult things to endure in life. Dementia, the falling away of one's mind is its own kind of crucifixion experience; nature's crucifixion of identity. When the church bids us to contemplate heaven, she takes our trembling hand and whispers to us. God won't let your loved one fall away. Their stories, their humor, their wit, their sense of identity may dissipate. But to see Jesus, to recognize him, is to hear the promise that God is faithful. God will gather all that is scattered, dissipated, and crucified, and breathe new

life into and bestow unshakeable identity upon us. You will recognize them again, and they you. Contemplate heaven. God is faithful.

Stephen perceives this faithful God whom he has come to trust in Jesus. The text says that Stephen perceives Jesus alive in the glory of God, which leads to the second inference we can draw: heaven is the unimaginable, uncontainable experience of Glory.

Let's quickly look at the words that are a bit like it to see why glory's so special. Glory's whole lot more than praise or fame. "Praise" is one-way and conversational, glory's shared and beyond words. "Fame" is empty and transitory; glory's wondrous and eternal. Glory's different from holiness. "Holiness" is part of the identity of God; glory is something that comes to fulfilment as God shares it with us, like a cloud that billows out as we enter it. "Ecstasy" is a word that conjures up the intensity of glory – that sense that everything else pales by comparison. But ecstasy is an out-of-the-body experience we discover on our own, whereas glory's deeper than the ordinary rather than outside it, something we fundamentally share with God and others. "Joy" is something wondrous and godly and eternal, but joy is simple and direct whereas glory is mysterious and trembling in a fabulous place beyond joy. Glory is the wonder of the full presence of God that reveals God's utter desire to be present to us in joy and delight and attention and love; and at the same time it's the magnetic, billowing aura that draws us inexorably into intimate, thrilling, everlasting and fulfilling discovery of our destiny in God. It's both the cloud of unknowing and the seeing of God face to face, all at the same time.

We can't know fully this Uncreated Glory that awaits us; we can only know in part. Have you been in a concert hall and felt the movement of the music building and building like a wave; yet the cresting energy of the music didn't engulf you, drown you out, so much as lift you into a higher affection for the gift of simply being there to hear it? Have you ever hiked to a mountaintop with a friend with whom you feel totally at home with; you yap and yap all the way up

sharing stories and catching up on lost time, to reach the top and share a silence so encompassing, you tremble before the expanse, yet your friend's arm on your shoulder allows you to experience it all as embrace? Have you ever picked up your child from the airport after their months abroad – seen the child you brought into the world coming down the escalator, and felt all the weight of worry you've carried those last months melt away as you saw them drop their bags and take off in a run towards you?

As I was writing this sermon, I was sitting next to Addie at snack time who decided to start stuffing her face with blackberries. She was eating them as if she had entered herself into a one person BlackBerry Eating Contest. She made out a loud sound, with her mouth full, and then erupted in applause for herself. I joined in the applause, and after she swallowed her face and hands all covered in juice, she let out a huge smile as if the whole universe was fond of her snack-time triumph. To contemplate heaven is to perceive these moments not as glitches of happiness in an otherwise dark world; but as beams of light pouring forth from that Eternal Sun illuminating our destiny.

To my friend who says he's just not interested in this, I'm tempted to kindly reply, "Are you sure?"

But we still have what is probably the most needling critique of contemplating heaven – it distracts us from making an earthly difference. Remember Vit's comment: the Bible promises me a home in heaven one day; I'm wondering if somebody can help me find a home down here.

Does heaven make any earthly difference?

There's a story about CS Lewis when he was attending the funeral service of one of his closest friends, the medievalist, writer, and theologian Charles Williams. Williams was a member of the literary group the Inklings, with Lewis and JRR Tolkien, and was certainly the most mystical of the bunch. He wrote about and clearly experienced an almost palpable sense of the unseen realm. He believed that heaven was all around us, not some distant place in the clouds,

but the fuller intensity of being that we only experience in snatches. After the service, as congregants from the funeral were huddled outside, a friend of the family looked over and saw Lewis, a boyish grin on his face, merrily leaping over a couple of headstones in the graveyard. This friend ran over to Lewis: “Jack, are you out of your mind?” Later, in a letter to Williams’ spouse, he wrote about his feeling in the church graveyard: “[I knew then that] my friendship with Charles is not ended. His death has had the very unexpected effect of making death itself look different: I believe in the next life ten times more strongly than I did then. At moments it seems almost tangible....Charles seems, in some undefinable way, to be all around us now.”

Leaping over headstones might be an indecent gesture, but the temper of it is surely Christian. Lewis had experienced something similar to Stephen. Assured of future bliss, they were able to live with less fear, and in Stephen’s case die with less fear. Stephen lived out his final breaths surrendering his spirit and breathing out forgiveness on his persecutors. He was free not to be anxious about his own life. In the end, I suppose that’s the advantage of contemplating your future bliss. You become free. You become free to be less attached to stuff and status and the constant strain of acquiring more. You are free to live sacrificially. Contemplating heaven doesn’t absolve us from the labors of the earth; or the care of the poor; this doesn’t prevent tears from flowing, or anger from swelling. It does remind you that when life bowls you over, and knocks you down, there is one standing in glory who will not let you go. In him, you too will stand. And every human person will stand in him. And it is our task, to help people – who’ve been bent low, like the poor and the hungry and the homeless - stand up in their life even now. Earthly dignity and heavenly glory go hand in hand; to contemplate the latter is to be courageously committed to the former.

So, friends, may we heed Stephen’s call to look to heaven this morning. I admit, this might feel a little unnatural, at least at first. We may wonder still if we believe in heaven. Fear of the unknown might be such that we may wonder if

we even desire heaven. Remember, heaven isn't far off in the clouds; its glory shines down on earth, and even wishes to shine through us on earth. Contemplate heaven: you may begin by wondering if you desire it; but along the way, you may have moments when the clouds part and the glorious light pouring through leaves you wondering if you've ever desired anything else.