



Pentecost (A)

Heaven

[RCL]: Acts 2:1-21 or Numbers 11:24-30; Psalm 104:25-35, 37; 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13 or Acts 2:1-21; John 20:19-23 or John 7:37-39

What do you believe about heaven?

According to polling in recent years, about 70% of Americans believe that heaven exists – and about the same number of Americans think they have an excellent chance of getting there.

At the same time, fewer than 60% of Americans say they believe in hell – and only a few percent think it's a place they're headed. Hell is real, alright, but for someone else.

If most of us – us being Americans – believe in heaven and think we're going there, and most of us believe in some kind of hell and believe emphatically that we're *not* going there, while at the same time Christians the world over are teaching their conviction that just about everybody but them *is* going to hell...

Then someone has to be wrong.

Despite the fervent belief in our own righteousness; despite the emphatic teaching that some are in and some are out; despite an absolute conviction in our own justification before God and another's damnation – someone is probably wrong.

Some concept of heaven is common to most human cultures: as the abode of God or gods, as an eternal haven for immortal souls, as a celestial afterlife. It is called by many names, understood in many ways; there is diversity even within the Christian understanding.

Some in the Middle Ages envisioned heaven as a city, surrounded by castles: a safe and idyllic fortress, a feudal ideal. Some envisioned heaven as a garden, perfect and fruitful: think of the Renaissance painters. Some considered heaven a metropolis, with streets laid out perfectly, no traffic, elegant houses, acres of lawn. Beautiful angels wearing flowing robes: this was the vision of Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg. Some envisioned heaven as a campus of sorts, with libraries and classrooms – seminars where the blissful elect could debate theology for eternity. This was popular with the 19th-century Spiritualists and has been the hope of some Jewish schools of thought, in their love of learning and debating scripture.

It seems to be, more often than not, that how a people view heaven sets the tone for their theological understanding, their notions about God – not the other way around, where religion forms a view of heaven. That’s an important point: that one’s understanding of heaven will determine one’s understanding, one’s idea, of God.

Which circles back to the earlier question: What do *you* believe about heaven?

The ancient Israelites didn’t think much about heaven. In Old Testament scripture, the Hebrew texts, heaven was the dwelling place of God. There was no sense of personal hereafter, and the Hebrew texts make no direct reference to an afterlife in heaven for the righteous. The belief was that all men and women, good and bad, sleep forever in *Sheol*, a dry, dusty, neutral underworld. It wasn’t until after the exile of the Jewish people to Babylon that the Jews, under the influence of their Persian neighbors, began to develop the dual notions of heaven and hell.

The Christian understanding of heaven grew out of these early Jewish understandings, which emphasized *this* life, one’s obligations to justice and charity, the fate of a community, peace, and prosperity. It took the New Testament, especially the visions related in Revelation, to fully develop an image of heaven as the abode of God and the resting place of the faithful.

The early Christian heaven was open to all people, based on their understanding from scripture and on the conviction that when Jesus died to save people, he died to save *all* people. We echo this understanding in some of our collects, our prayers, which we say on Sunday mornings. The Apostle Paul’s ministry, too, is built on this conviction, as we can read in his letters. But this understanding didn’t last very long, as some Early Church fathers soon stratified heaven into tiers of desirability based on worthiness. We see that reflected later in Dante’s writing.

This meant not only that some were in and some were out, but also that some were receiving a greater part of the blessings than others. Various Christian groups refined this further in coming up with the idea that some people are predestined for heaven and others are not.

These different understandings of heaven – that everyone gets in, and that only a very limited certain people get in – are part of the difference between what is called in theological terms *universal* salvation and *particular* salvation. Universal salvation claims that Jesus died for everyone and everyone gets into heaven. Particular salvation claims that only some folks are saved by Jesus’ work, and only some folks will get into heaven.

Give us that old-time religion when Christians understood the saving love of Jesus to embrace all people! This is what the early centuries of Christians believed and taught, and this is central to what today's Pentecost event presages.

Pentecost, that great moment we celebrate today, tells of when the Holy Spirit filled all those gathered – people whose homelands challenge the pronunciation skills of the best of readers. They spoke in their own voices and languages while hearing with one ear. And *all* people were put right with God through Jesus and filled with the Holy Spirit of God. The central message of Pentecost was the conviction of the earliest Christians that *all*

people are beloved of God, *all* people are redeemed in Jesus, and *all* people, *all* people, are welcome in God's Kingdom.

Can we learn from this? Can we hold up a hope of heaven that welcomes everyone? Can we believe in a God that big?

Considering human nature – considering Church history – the simple moment of Pentecost is a remarkable and radical eruption of God's healing into human brokenness.

In this time of health and social and faith challenge, we need the reassurance of God's healing grace. We need the memory of Pentecost to inspire confidence in God's welcome for all people. We need an enlarged understanding of the Body of Christ. We need to believe that God is good enough, big enough, generous enough, to make a place for each and every person in the Kingdom of God.

There are people who consider themselves part of a remnant church: a break-off of a break-off of a break-off of a break-off. And in each instance, the numbers get smaller, the convictions more rigidly certain, the welcome more limited. Heaven, in their understanding, may not allow in anyone outside their small group. Heaven, for them, may have streets paved with gold, but they'll be empty streets.

Do you hear how our definitions of heaven limit God's grace? God's goodness? God's generosity?

We need a solid and generous commitment to human community right now. We need a clear vision of the Body of Christ and the Kingdom of God. In a time that requires so much separation one from another, we need more than ever to figure out what it means to all be in this together. It was John Donne who wrote in 1624 as he lay feverish, fearing death: "No man is an island... every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main."

Where the Old Testament story of the Tower of Babel has long been understood as an explanation for the breaking up of human community, Pentecost is often interpreted as a healing of that break. When the Holy Spirit of God rested on people from many nations and backgrounds, a division between peoples was brought back into wholeness by the Spirit of God.

If the Pentecost event can teach us anything, may it open our hearts to the very enormity of God. May it help us to know that we are all children of a mighty and loving Creator.

And again, we circle back to the original question: What do you believe about heaven? The answer to that question will tell you much of what you believe about God.

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