

“Imagine there’s a heaven”
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Heaven. It is one of faith’s greatest mysteries.

Take this story, for example.

Two people die. One is a Syracuse basketball fan, the other is a Duke fan. The clouds part, the pearly gates appear, and the two men stand outside heaven eagerly waiting for eternal bliss. The gates open, and a large, billowy red carpet rolls out and stops at the feet of the Duke fan, who stands, gaping, as all the saints walk down the carpet and embrace him. A choir of angels sings and plucks harps. Then a blue carpet rolls out on top of the red one, and Mary, mother of Jesus, appears. Finally, a white carpet rolls out on top of the other two, and Jesus himself walks through the gates. Together, the joyful band—the saints, the Virgin Mary, the Lord, and the happy Duke fan—turn to enter the City of God. The gates close.

The Syracuse fan, bewildered, is left alone. Finally, a small wooden door in the wall opens and a shabby pastor in blue jeans and a black T-shirt beckons him in. “What’s this?” the Syracuse fan asks. “I’m happy to be here and all, I’m not complaining, but that other guy, he got red carpet and blue carpet and white carpet, he got saints and choirs of angels, and he was greeted by Mary and the Lord himself.”

The minister claps him warmly on the back, and as the two walk into the holy city, he says, “That’s the first Duke fan they’ve seen up here in 50 years.”¹

We all have different ideas about what heaven will be like. Some of us imagine wide-open fields, slathered in sunshine and flowers; others, soaring mountains or sandy beaches. Some of us believe we will be living in many-roomed mansions. We’ll spend eternity talking with the great minds of history—Aristotle, Michelangelo, Einstein. We’ll meet Jesus and stand face to face with God. For some of us, heaven is a great, big family reunion; we’ll see all of our loved ones again, perhaps even a pet or two. All hurts will be healed and forgiven, and enemies will become friends. Some of us think we’ll have bodies like the ones we have now, but better. Others of us imagine a spiritual union with God and all existence. Most of us believe there will be no more pain, or death, or sadness.

Our images of heaven are gleaned from Sunday school lessons, funeral homilies, movies, art, and our own deepest longings. The Bible itself is a patchwork of different, sometimes competing visions of what happens after we die. Jesus never speaks of it directly; he resorts to parables.

With so many disparate ideas about heaven, a lot of folks have concluded that we’re best focusing on the present, not worrying about what we can’t really know anyway until we die.

¹ This joke is adapted from a Jesuit priest joke found in *Heaven* by Lisa Miller; a good portion of the text is taken directly from Miller.

Many worry that the concept of heaven dilutes the urgency with which we pursue change here on earth. They worry all talk of heaven is pie-in-the-sky escapism. Scientists, moreover, challenge the idea that there is any “us” left after our brains cease to function. And theologians worry that we inevitably get heaven wrong when we try to imagine something so beyond our comprehension and experience.

In 1997, *Time* magazine declared that heaven was dead. Belief in heaven reached an all-time low, just as life on earth reached for many an all-time high, with soaring material prosperity, new medical achievements, and the lowest rate of US unemployment in 27 years. With the elderly confined to nursing homes and hospitals, death was a distant reality for much of middle America.

Then, September 11 happened, and death came crashing into our reality.

People huddled in churches, seeking the same thing every person who buries their parent, their spouse, or their child, is seeking. Like a toy battered from long use and unable to wind up anymore, they felt broken, and they needed to know how to go on. How to get out of bed in the morning, how to put one foot in front of the other, how to laugh without it feeling like a betrayal, how to remember without falling to pieces. Faith in heaven wasn't an escape from life; it was the only rescue boat leading back to life.

By 2007, 81 percent of Americans reported a belief in heaven.

The crisis we faced as a country, the crisis each of us faces at some point in our lives, was the same crisis that catalyzed Jesus and the visionary in the Book of Revelation to speak the words we read this morning.

Instead of hijacked planes or cancer, Jesus speaks of thieves that come to destroy, to usher in what Paul called last week the dominion of death. Jesus' world is in turmoil, and it's going to get a lot worse before it gets better. He himself will die on this Lenten journey.

Many scholars believe, in turn, that the author of Revelation is a Jewish Christian who escaped Palestine following the Jewish war against Rome in 66-70 CE and the ensuing terror that the Roman Empire unleashed on Jerusalem, burning it to the ground. If true, our visionary of the New Jerusalem is a man deeply grieving, who has no city to call home.

It is amid these crises that heaven appears.

What Jesus promises is an intimacy evocative of Psalm 23. The sheep belong to the shepherd. They know his voice. He calls them, each one by name, and leads them out into green pastures. He goes ahead of them, through death, through the cross, and shows them the way to life.

In Revelation's vision of a new heaven, God makes a home among mortals. God dwells with them and calls them God's people. Death itself is thrown into the lake of fire. Lives once separate become a community.

To explain what this heavenly community is like, Revelation speaks of a city. *The city.*

The thing about cities is that everyone in them needs each other. The carpenter needs the plumber, who needs the grocer, who needs the doctor, who needs the teacher, who needs the child. In cities, we are all connected. And in God's city, there is no longer anything—no pain, no death, no enmity, no sin—that can separate us from one another and from God.

And what do we do in this heaven? We live.

If right now we experience only a small bit of life—those fleeting moments when we do more than exist; we live—then heaven is those moments multiplied. Those moments when we feel like we've become part of something vast. Those moments of joy and purpose and togetherness that whisk us out of our daily existence into something higher. Higher like heaven.

Heaven isn't the afterlife. It *is* life. It is the consummation of God's daily work to pull back the forces of death and despair and give us life. We cannot conceive of it, but we have tasted it. We have tasted it in song and in worship. We have tasted it while holding our children and our loved ones. We have tasted it when thousands of people stand up together in protest of injustice. We have tasted it standing in the woods, with life bursting at its seams all around us. We have tasted it when we have eaten the bread and drank the cup of Communion.

Jesus declares, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

Of Jesus, it is written: "In him, was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (1:4-5).

Jesus broke into our reality, and he brought with him heaven, a new way of life here on earth that, for each of us, will one day be perfected when we are united with God.

When a baby is still in its mother's womb, it thinks this is life. This womb—and its safety, its comfort—is the boundary of existence. Then, a light appears, and the child is brought out, crying, into a strange, new world. It's cold and scary at first. The child might be tempted to think this is the end. But then the baby opens its eyes and sees her: the one who had given it life, the one who had always been there but unseen and unknown. Mommy. Over the years, the child realizes that life in the womb, as necessary and beautiful as it was, was just a foretaste of what life could be.

Perhaps, in dying, we go through a similar transition. We pass from this womb, which we thought was life, into heaven, the fullness of life. We see the One who had always been there, unseen and unknown.

And there, God will call you by name, will wipe away every tear, and death will be no more.

Amen.