

## "Our Hope of Glory"

a sermon by the Rev. Jim Bell

Duke Memorial United Methodist Church

Durham, NC

10:55 a.m. Sunday, July 17, 2005

Text: Revelation 7:9-17 Luke 10:17-24 NRSV

Opening prayer: O God, open our spiritual eyes to receive a glimpse of your glory in your Word for us today. Amen.

### THE GLORY OF HEAVEN

A young girl was walking with her father in the countryside on a still, crisp evening. There were no neon signs, no automobile headlights or street lamps to mar the beauty of the night sky. As the girl looked at the sky, filled with an array of twinkling stars, she said, "Daddy, if the wrong side of heaven is so beautiful, what do you think the right side will be like?"

It will be glorious, so glorious.

Toward the end of the last century, Ed Card served as Superintendent of the Sunshine Rescue Mission of St. Louis. In that capacity, he helped many persons who were down and out. Ed was a radiant Christian who always seemed to be bubbling over with the joy of the Lord. During a sermon or prayer he would often explode with the expression, "Glory!" His smiling face earned him the nickname, "Old Glory Face." It was his custom to close his own praying with a reference to heaven, ending with the phrase, "and that will be glory for me."

Ed Card had a friend named Charles Gabriel. Inspired by the witness of his friend, Charles Gabriel wrote the following hymn:

"When all my labors and trials are o'er

And I am safe on that beautiful shore,  
 Just to be near the dear Lord I adore  
 Will through the ages be glory for me.

When by the gift of His infinite grace,  
 I am accorded in heaven a place,  
 Just to be there and to look on His face  
 Will through the ages be glory for me.

O that will be glory for me, Glory for me, glory for me;  
 When by His grace I shall look on his face,  
 That will be glory, glory for me."

We can experience the glory of eternal life in heaven through faith in Jesus Christ. I believe that the glory of heaven will be beyond our wildest dreams. It will be something so wonderful that we cannot begin to imagine it.

In heaven there will be no fear. We will not need locks on the doors, bars at the windows, or alarm systems. Everything that causes fear will be eliminated. In heaven there will be no night. On earth we equate night with darkness, ignorance and evil. Light is a symbol of understanding and beauty. The psalmist writes, "The Lord is my light and my salvation - whom shall I fear?" (Psalm 27:1) God will be our eternal light in heaven.

In heaven there will be no more suffering, no more pain, no more crying, no more death. Think of it! How wonderful the prospects are for all who suffer from arthritis, from cancer, from recurring illnesses of any kind.

A woman in Florida lost her only son when he was just 21 years old. This young man had had rheumatic fever as a child. The fever had left the boy weak and incapacitated. He had never been able to run and play as vigorously as other children.

Three nights after the young man died, his mother was awakened by a circle of light crossing her ceiling. At first she thought she was dreaming, but then she realized she was not. In the center of the light, several inches in diameter, there appeared the silhouette of a young man. He was dancing, running, skipping, whirling and turning flips. Then the woman heard a voice. It was unmistakably her son's. It said, "Hey, mom, look at me!"

The woman said, "I stopped grieving for my son that very night. I was so happy for him that I couldn't be selfish and wish he were still with me."

There is no illness or death in heaven.

In our scientific world which focuses so much upon the problems of this world and the achievements of man, it is natural for many to wonder, "Is heaven real?" Heaven is real. Heaven is as real as God, as real as Jesus, as real as the truth of this book (the Bible).

The next question follows, "How do we get there?" We get there through our faith in the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

Billy Graham writes that the Heidelberg Catechism, originally written in 1563, was a favorite of his father-in-law. On his study wall, he had the first question and answer of the Heidelberg Catechism framed. It reads, "Q.1. What is your only comfort, in life and in death? A. That I belong - body and soul, in life and death - not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him." Our faith in Jesus assures us of heaven.

GATHERED AROUND THE THRONE

In the Revelation to John there is a vision of the heavenly court. A vast throng of people redeemed by Christ, approach the throne of God. There are so many that they cannot be counted. There are some from every nation, speaking every kind of language. They are wearing white robes and carrying palm branches - both symbolizing victory. These persons have won the final victory. They take their place around God's throne, along with all those who have been faithful and loyal throughout all generations.

Can you see them? They all cry out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (7:10) "Salvation" in Greek means to be safe. It carries the connotation of wholeness and healing. It is Jesus Christ the Lamb who has the power to bring salvation and wholeness. The Lamb has done it! God's people trusted in God's promises, and God has been worthy of their trust.

Then all of the angels fall on their faces before the throne and worship God. They sing, "Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever!" (7:12) Can you imagine it?

It is clear that the central business of those in heaven is to praise God. All of the saints and angels surround God on his throne with endless singing and rejoicing. God is the center.

In our scripture lesson, one of the elders explains who this great multitude of people is: "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." (7:14) The blood of the Lamb - the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ - cleanses us from sin. These are people who have asked for and received the forgiveness of their sins. They are unlike the man we encountered last week in C. S. Lewis' book about eternal life, The Great Divorce. He would rather be condemned to hell than ask for the Bleeding Charity, than ask for Jesus' forgiveness.

This is how we can enter heaven - by repenting of our sins, asking for God's

forgiveness, and believing in Jesus Christ. Heaven is not a place for prideful people who only believe in themselves. We can experience the glory of eternal life in heaven through faith in Jesus Christ.

God will shelter his people in heaven from hunger, thirst, sunstroke and heat. "The Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." (7:17) What an image! God himself will dry every tear of pain or suffering or grief from our eyes. What a glorious place heaven will be!

## HEAVEN IS OUR HOME

One Sunday a Sunday School teacher smiled at her class and exclaimed, "All right, all those who want to go to heaven, raise your hands." Everybody in the class raised a hand, except for one boy. "Don't you want to go to heaven?" the teacher asked. The boy replied, "I can't ma'am. My mother wants me to come straight home."

We can become too caught up in the things of this earth. I wonder if I asked all of you, "Would you like to go to heaven?" how many would say, "I'm sorry, but I can't. I've got to go eat lunch now." We are so bound to the immediate. Preparing for our trip to heaven is the ultimate long-range planning. It is preparing for eternity with God.

To die and go to heaven should be like going home for Christmas. We are there with all of our loved ones, to sing and laugh and hug, and this time the experience will never end, but go on forever and ever.

In fact, heaven is the true home for Christians. The apostle Paul writes the Philippians, "Our citizenship is in heaven." (Philippians 3:20)

On one occasion 70 of Jesus' disciples returned to him. They were so excited about the power of Jesus which they were able to exhibit. They exclaimed, "Lord, in

your name even the demons submit to us!" Jesus replied, "Do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." (Luke 10:20)

Jesus tells his disciples that even though he has given them great power, a still more precious gift is theirs. They are loved eternally by God. Jesus has prepared a place for them and all who believe in him in heaven. Some day this world will pass away. We will all die. The eternal fact is that our names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life, and we will live forever and ever in our heavenly home.

Charles Allen recalls how he used to play baseball as a boy. His father went to the games because he was always interested in whatever his children did. Charles remembers one game especially. It was a tight game. Charles hit the ball a long way. He was running around the bases as fast as he could, but he seemed to gain added strength when he heard his father shouting above the crowd, "Come on home, Charles, come on home!"

Since his father has died, there have been times when the going was a little harder for him. He has been tempted to do less than his best. But then he can hear his father saying, "Come on home, Charles, come on home."

All of the saints who have gone before us are in heaven today, looking down at us and cheering, "Come on home! Keep the faith. Finish the race. Come on home.

I don't know your individual situation today, but God knows your heart. You may wish to stand and sing the hymn and praise God for heaven. "Glory!" as Ed Card would say. You may want to come and kneel and pray for encouragement to come on home to heaven or to thank God for heaven. You may wish to confess your sins and trust in

Jesus' promises. Or you may want to pray for family members or friends, so that they would trust God and be able to live forever in heaven.

Whatever your situation is today, the Lord is here and wants to speak with you. Frank and I will be praying for you and others at the chancel rail as we sing our next hymn. If you would like Frank or me to pray with you, simply kneel beside one of us when you come.

What a glorious thing the promise and hope of heaven is! Praise the Lord! Let us sing.