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Roland Park Presbyterian Church  
Easter 3 (Year C)

Psalm 148  
Ephesians 2: 19-22  
Rev 21: 1-6 & 22: 1-5

**Revelation Series:  
God's Dwelling**

I have an idea for a new TV show. It's along the lines of the book *Children's Letters to God* or the show hosted by Art Linkletter and Bill Cosby, *Kids Say the Darndest Things*. But, instead of children dealing with adult topics, as in those two examples, my idea involves adults responding to topics raised by children. I would call it *Kids Ask the Darndest Things* or perhaps *When Kids Get Curious*. It would feature adults trying to answer the difficult questions kids have a tendency to ask, such as "Why is the sky blue?" and the dreaded, "Where do babies come from?" Interestingly, often times kids questions are of a religious or theological nature. Questions like, "If God made everything, then who made God?" or "Where is heaven?"

From time to time parents of young children approach me asking for advice on how to respond to such theological questions. Actually, what they are usually looking for, it seems to me, is a pat answer that will end what might otherwise be an uncomfortable topic of discussion for them. My response, much to their chagrin, is not that simple. I typically give two pieces of advice. First, instead of trying to provide a quick answer, I urge them to affirm their child's curiosity and questioning, and, if age appropriate enter into a bit of a theological discussion with their child. Most parents will resist this course because they don't feel equipped to do so. And so my second piece of advice is that they not be afraid to admit when they don't know the answers to such questions.

But still, doesn't it seem odd that as adults, we are generally not any better equipped than children at answering a seemingly simple theological question like, "Where is heaven?" Shouldn't we be able to explain it in a way that doesn't make it seem like a child's fantasy? But there seems to be quite a bit of confusion among Christians over the subject of heaven.

Part of the confusion can be traced to the word itself. Heaven literally means "the sky" (as in the heavens), which seems to indicate an actual place the physical universe. But it is a mistake to suppose that, in using this word, the ancient biblical writers, even with their primitive understanding of their surroundings, thought that heaven was physical place that could be reached if only we had the ability to travel to the farthest limits of the world. For them it was way of talking about God's dwelling place. As biblical scholar N.T. Wright points out, "the biblical writers move more effortlessly than most modern readers between that meaning (a location within the world of space, time, matter) and the regular meaning of 'God's dwelling place'—that is, a different sort of 'location' altogether."<sup>1</sup>

But what sort of location is it then? That's where the confusion seems to come in. In general terms, there are three distinct possibilities. Either God's space and ours are one and the same, or they are completely separate, or they are neither the same nor completely separate, but intermingled. We have already seen the problem of locating God's space within the known universe. If this were true, evidence of God, it would stand to reason, should be more scientifically discernable. We should be able to see God in a telescope or microscope or something like that. Not even the biblical authors with their limited knowledge of the physical world fell into that trap.

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<sup>1</sup> *Simply Christian* (New York: Harper One, 2006) p. 59. In addition to this quote, much of this section of the sermon is informed by the fifth chapter of Wright's book.

The second option is the one most have us probably have in mind when we talk about heaven. For example, if a child were to ask what heaven is like we might respond, “Well, we don’t know because we haven’t been there. Only people who have passed on know what heaven is like.” –a seemingly reasonable, Christian response. The deeper implication, though, is that God’s reality and ours are completely separate and the only way to cross over is death. Death is our transition from our reality to God’s. The problem with this option, with this way of thinking is that it paints a picture of God that is other, that is distant, remote and has little if anything to do with our daily lives, except in some final sense of judging whether or not we are worthy of entry to God’s realm, heaven. Unfortunately, this is the impression of God that most people have, including many Christians. And it’s probably one of the main reasons why, when polled, some 90 percent of people profess a belief in God, yet considerably less actually live out that belief in any noticeable or tangible way throughout their life. Truth be told, if this picture of God were accurate there would be little reason, beyond external compulsion or fear of judgment, to worship God. Nor does this picture of God resemble the God revealed to us through Jesus Christ or the rest of salvation history.

The Bible actually presents us with a much different picture of God, one not simply located within space and time, yet at the same time not off in some distant remote location, completely set apart from us. The third option, that God’s space and ours, while not the same, do intermingle, is the one that is most cohesive with the biblical witness. Admittedly, this is the messiest of the three options which is what makes it difficult to explain. But once we get past our desire for a pat answer, I think we might find this to be a really exciting and meaningful way to talk about the concept of heaven and its impact on our faith.

For the past few weeks we have been taking an extended look at the last book of the Bible, the book of *Revelation*. I have talked about what the book is not and I've argued that it's not to be read as a prediction of the future, that it's not about God's final judgment or the destruction of the world, an event some refer to as the "rapture," even though that word never once appears in the book or anywhere else in the Bible. Nor is it merely a metaphorical description of the trials and tribulations of the early Christian Church. All throughout I have been building a case for an interpretation of the book as one that takes seriously the idea that God is in charge of creation, not in some remote way, but intimately, and that witnesses to a faith that ultimately God's purposes will prevail, but, at the same time, does not advocate a passive resignation for things as they are. In other words, it is the early Church's working out of our third option for talking about heaven, the idea that God's reality and ours, while not the same, can and do intermingle. This can be clearly seen in today's reading where John tells us that ultimately these realities will merge and form a new heaven and a new earth. Notice that he doesn't say that God will wipe out the previous creation and start all over again; John says that in the end God will renew creation. We hear the proclamation, "See I am making all things new." Not the proclamation, "I am making everything over again" or "I am creating a separate paradise, but only for those I particularly like." It says, "See I am making all things new."

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Of the biblical notion of heaven, this new creation John is talking about, Frederick Buechner gives perhaps one of the best explanations: *"Its not a place of course, but a condition...If we only had eyes to see and ears to hear and wits to understand, we would know [heaven]...is as close as breathing and is crying out to be*

*born both within ourselves and within the world; we would know that [heaven] is what all of us hunger for above all other things even when we don't know its name or realize that its what were starving to death for...[It] is where we belong. It is home...[And] insofar as here and there, and now and then, God's will is being done in various odd ways among us even at this moment, [it] has already come...[but] insofar as all the odd ways we do his will at this moment are at best half baked and halfhearted, [it] is still a long way off."*<sup>2</sup>

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Today, in just a few minutes, if we have eyes to see, ears to hear and wits to understand, we just may catch a glimpse of this new creation as we baptize Paul Edward Cayood the III. Each child is gift; each life is evidence of God's grace. And though Paul is not yet old enough to ask his parents any tough theological questions, God's love for him is sure. And on the day when he does start asking his parents those tough questions, they will not be alone in answering them because of the promises you and I will make in conjunction with his baptism. They will have a community of faith, which will not only support and join them in exploring the tough questions, but whose witness they can point to, in addition to their own, as evidence of what it means to live with the faith that heaven is not only a future promise, but a present possibility, if only here and now, and then and there. In addition to our pledge to live the life of faith and raise our children in the knowledge of God's love for them, baptism is also one of those places where God's reality and ours intermingle, where they touch, where we get a glimpse of the fullness of our lives in God, where we discover the truth proclaimed in *John's Revelation*, "See, the home of God is among mortals."

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<sup>2</sup>This quote is a merging of two different quotes from Buechner on the topic from *The Clown in the Belfry* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992), pp. 152-153 & *Wishful Thinking* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), pp. 49-50.

*Let us pray: Thank you God, for the promise that we are about to claim and celebrate for Paul, the promise that you are not far from any of us, that your grace is ever before us, that you love each of us as a parent loves their precious child. AMEN.*